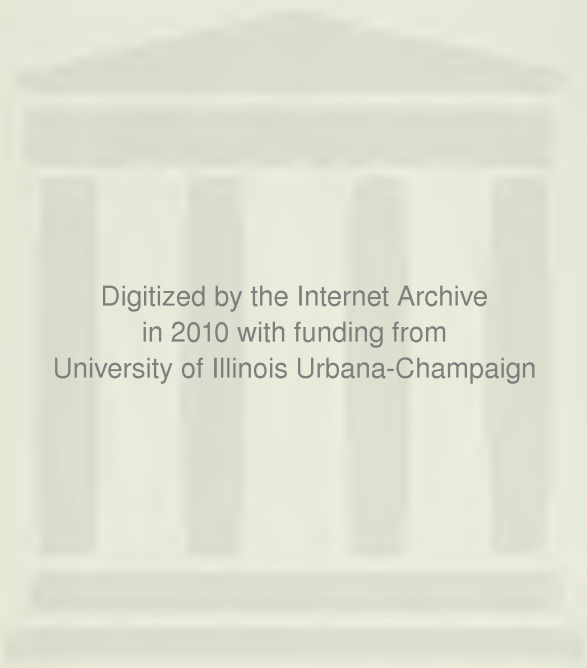


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THE AMUSEMENTS
OF
A MAN OF FASHION.



THE AMUSEMENTS
OF
A MAN OF FASHION.

A Nobel.

BY
NORMAN NUGENT.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.
1873.

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CONTENTS

OF

THE FIRST VOLUME.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE GRANGE AND ITS INMATES	1
II. SIR FREDERICK MAKES TWO MORNING CALLS .	15
III. "ONLY A FACE AT A WINDOW"	29
IV. HOW LADY MORTON PLANNED TO MARRY HER SON	34
V. COMPLICATIONS	44
VI. CROSS PURPOSES	56
VII. TOO LATE	65
VIII. DEATH OR LIFE	74
IX. CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN	80
X. THE EARL'S STORY	88
XI. LUCIA	96
XII. A STRANGE COINCIDENCE	104
XIII. MINNIE BROOKS	107
XIV. THE POST BRINGS UNWELCOME TIDINGS . .	122

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CHAP.	PAGE
XV. NOT MUCH TO TELL	137
XVI. BEHIND THE SCENES	150
XVII. EX PARTE	160
XVIII. CAPTAIN LENHAM GOES DOWN TO DONNINGTON	171
XIX. A SHADOW ON THE THRESHOLD	177
XX. FOILED	189
XXI. SHOWS HOW THE PAST AND THE FUTURE ARE BOUND IN THE CHAIN OF THE PRESENT .	199
XXII. ON EARTH PEACE	211
XXIII. TELLS WHO IT WAS THAT LOOKED FROM THE WINDOW IN OXENTEN RECTORY	219
XXIV. CHIT-CHAT	231
XXV. EDITH MOORFIELD	243
XXVI. TELLS HOW MANY SINS WERE LAID TO SIR FREDERICK'S ACCOUNT	258



THE AMUSEMENTS OF A MAN OF FASHION.

CHAPTER I.

THE GRANGE AND ITS INMATES.

ON the summit of a gentle hill near a pretty village in one of the central counties of England stands a fine old mansion called Donnington Grange.

The reminiscences of a proud eventful past seem to speak in the fortified wall and antique gateway, the moss-grown column, and the lions crouching on the threshold; links of a long chain which the

hand of time is dexterously disconnecting, though with a lingering, latent fondness, as if the spirit of all that has been pleaded with the present to forbear. Even the breeze that murmurs amidst the giant oaks and elms, relics of a bygone age which breasted the storm in the days of the Cavaliers and Roundheads, seems to have a history and lesson of its own.

Far to the east, embosomed in a lovely vale through which a small stream pursues its course, is a quaint-looking Gothic church, within whose sacred precincts repose the representatives of the Morton line, the noble owners of the Grange. True, some sleep apart. Many serving their king and country in a soldier's or a sailor's life, have found a resting-place beneath the waves of ocean, or on the widespread battle-fields of Europe. But thither have the majority been borne in all the

“pomp and circumstance of woe,” amidst the tears and blessings of the neighbourhood, for they were and are a generous-hearted race, as renowned for large-handed, discriminating charity as for old descent and unblemished reputation.

Everything around bears witness to refined and careful cultivation, for the Mortons are wealthy, and spend much of their income in adorning and beautifying their ancestral home.

One bright morning in May Sir Frederick Morton might have been seen standing on the steps beneath the porch (over which were deeply cut in stone the family arms and motto, “*Magni nominis umbra*”), watching the paces of a splendid black charger which the groom was gently leading up and down the carriage-drive in front of the house. Sir Frederick was a man of majestic presence, tall and muscular, of that type

not inaptly called robust, which at the first glance conveys an impression of great strength. He was apparently waiting for some one.

Presently the door behind him opened, and there appeared a lady long past the prime of life, but still retaining traces of great beauty. The young Baronet sprang forward to offer her his arm with something of tender gallantry in his voice and manner.

“My dear mother, I am so glad. You are just in time to go round the garden with me before I start.”

After some indifferent conversation, Lady Morton made the inquiry—

“When do you return, Frederick?”

“Well, when I have accomplished my errand.”

“And you will not fix the day?”

“How can I? Lawrence may be gone ;

a thousand things may intervene. Ah, my dear mother, you had much better not send me away. You and Mary will be moped to death, and the household go all wrong."

"Oh, do not be conceited!" rejoined Lady Morton, gazing fondly on the flushing countenance of her only and idolized son. Then in a lower tone, she added, "I could almost fancy this reluctance proceeded from another cause ; some strong attraction? Confess, now, I am right?"

Her look was bright and cheerful. A true love-tale would have found her no unwilling listener. For years it had been her wish to see him married. It was a favourite maxim of hers that "a Morton should marry early, for he might die before his prime," and a shade of anxiety had more than once disturbed her mind, because

the last of the race showed so little inclination to prolong it.

To judge by the short lives of the majority, the good lady was not far wrong in her idea. Few comparatively had lived beyond the dawn of manhood, and for many generations back the heir had been a minor. Sir Frederick laughingly assured her there was no need for hurry in his case, as he had long since left the army, and had not the slightest intention again to travel by land or sea: but the wish continued the same. It was a positive offence against society that the last of the Mortons should be a bachelor at thirty.

Could he have seen how much she reckoned on his answer, he might not have had the heart to undeceive her.

“Nonsense, mother. Nay, on my honour, this neighbourhood has no attractions

for me beyond the dear old Grange, yourself, and our darling May."

He was too truthful to equivocate, and yet the deep flush remained. It could not be fancy on her part. She looked as she felt—perplexed and disappointed.

A pause of some seconds followed. It was broken by the Baronet himself.

"How is our dear-invalid this morning?"

"I scarcely know. Dr. Mayhew persists in declaring there has been some great shock to the nervous system; but I cannot imagine anything of the kind. As for Mary herself, neither commands nor reproof will induce her to confide in me."

"Of course not," muttered Sir Frederick, uneasily, a sudden gloom overshadowing his features. "Women never can have patience with each other! Reproof indeed! Rather pity and forbearance."

The last words only were audible.

This was setting fire to tinder. Lady Morton indignantly withdrew her arm.

“What do you mean, Frederick? Surely no daughter of our house would ever place herself in a position to require either?”

“I mean nothing, dearest mother,” rejoined the Baronet, gravely, almost sadly, “except that if poor Mary is ill, and consequently depressed and irritable, she needs the more consideration from us.”

This could hardly be his real meaning; but Lady Morton did not think fit to inquire any further. She could not brook the humiliating notion of being called to exercise a pitying forbearance towards any members of her family, after they had arrived at the years of discretion. Even from their infancy “*Magni nominis umbra*” had kept them out of many juvenile absurdities, and surely in their wiser man-

hood and womanhood she had a right to expect that they would fulfil the promise of their childhood? The sorrows and faults of the imagination she did not even understand. It was her aim and wish to be able to respect her children, and to be in turn respected by them. Another of her favourite maxims was that "the virtuous and pure-minded have nothing to fear." Sound morality, undoubtedly; but as we rarely sympathize save by experience, it made her on some points hard.

Mother and son came back silently to the spot where the black charger was impatiently struggling to approach his master.

A magnificent beast, with broad chest and powerful limbs; small, finely-turned head, and a peculiarly clean look about the hoofs, as if nature had bestowed especial care on their formation.

Black Harry was the admiration of all equestrian enthusiasts, particularly among the ladies. "No wonder," said the envious, "they loved him for the sake of his rider."

Requesting Lady Morton to wait for him in the library, Sir Frederick ran upstairs. Passing through a long corridor, he came at last to a large crimson door.

Drawing this back, another door presented itself. Here he knocked gently once or twice; then tried the fastening and entered.

The room beyond was spacious and well-furnished. An oak wardrobe that might have held the multitudinous garments of Queen Bess, with full-length mirrors of plate glass, stood exactly opposite the door, producing a double reflection of Sir Frederick as he stealthily advanced. The windows were partially darkened, but

sufficient light came through the half-closed blinds to distinguish tolerably clearly. The wainscot was curiously panelled with allegorical devices, and over the fire-place hung the likeness of a grim warrior-ancestor, with penetrating eyes which possessed the peculiarity observable in some old pictures, of seeming to follow the spectator's movements. Sir Miles always looked at people with a scrutinizing, angry expression; perhaps it was remarkable in life, or the painter did him an injustice.

A cabinet said to have belonged to Anne Boleyn; an *escritoire* with silver lamp attached; a dressing table covered with white muslin, on which were many lady-like knick-knacks; and a small spring couch, were scattered round at convenient and well-chosen intervals. A pretty French bedstead stood in a recess some fourteen or fifteen feet from the door.

The fair occupant had fallen asleep, but her brother's kiss aroused her, and with a smile of recognition she drew him down to her, until his great height rendering a stooping position anything but easy, he laughingly sank on his knees by the bedside.

“There, now you are down I can look at you, my dear, tall, handsome brother.”

The Baronet had been too long accustomed to this tender flattery to offer to disclaim it. Perhaps as there is a species of self-appreciation entirely distinct from vanity, a keen perception of what is—the glass of the strong-minded who need not to be told of either deficiency or merit—the tone of sisterly affection swept by as the casual reflection of the truth; or perhaps he did not even hear, for he was very anxious in more senses than one, and looked the

question that delicacy of feeling forbade him to express.

Mary Morton read the inquiry, traced the unspoken wish to soothe and cheer and sympathize, and resolutely strove to thrust it all aside.

And yet she dearly loved her brother!

Silence is sometimes dangerous where there is anything to conceal.

“Are you going to bring me a sister, Fred?”

Sir Frederick shook his head with a faint gesture of denial.

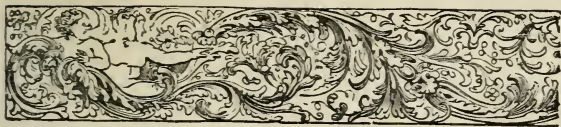
“I am very uneasy about you, darling, and am more than half inclined to stay at home.”

“I—I am not ill, only lazy, and not very strong; strong enough to keep you prisoner, though, you dear giant.” And the other little hand stole round to meet its fellow, drawing him so close that he could

not look into her eyes without a resistance which he would not use.

But he had read their secret, or thought he had, and his heart failed him.





CHAPTER II.

SIR FREDERICK MAKES TWO MORNING CALLS.



E must now introduce our readers to the library of a somewhat gloomy-looking residence in Eaton Square.

The blinds were all down, but a stray sun-beam danced hither and thither on the rich Turkey carpet, and although the middle of May, there was a fire burning dimly in the low polished grate, perhaps a necessary comfort to one long accustomed to a warmer climate.

Seated in a large easy chair, intently poring over several sheets of closely written manuscript, was a man in a deep mourning

dress, to judge by outward semblance not more than five-and-twenty years of age.

Masses of raven-black hair surmounting the broad, open forehead, rendered still more striking a marble-white complexion. The eyes and mouth were beautiful, but the chin was too long and pointed, and altogether the face was one that would be considered rather intellectual and interesting than regularly handsome. Everything around him bespoke refinement and high birth—the scholar and the gentleman. Packages and portmanteaus scattered round the room seemed to indicate the eve of some far journey. On a table at his side lay a thin red volume, apparently connected with the manuscript, for his right hand was firmly closed over it, while his left rested on the copy he was reading.

Having turned over the last page, he

rose, evidently intending to consign it to the flames ; but, changing his mind by a sudden impulse, he folded the loose sheets carefully together, secreting them in a cabinet that stood in a corner of the room. Then taking up the little volume before mentioned, which also proved to be a manuscript, he was speedily engrossed in its contents.

It would have been a curious study to note the fluctuations of feeling that swept across that usually marble countenance, amongst which, however, pain decidedly predominated. The dragon-clock on the chimney-piece struck the quarter thrice, still he read on, and a knock was heard without, thrice repeated, ere it arrested his attention.

“Come in.”

A servant entered, bearing a silver tray with letters. The young Earl—for such was his rank—carelessly glanced at the

address, and tossed them aside, impatient of the interruption. Then seeing that the man waited, he looked up.

“Sir Frederick Morton, my lord.”

“Show him in.”

Hastily concealing the book, the Earl advanced to meet the visitor with the quiet cordiality of finished breeding, tintured by a deep shade of melancholy.

“My dear Morton, this is an unexpected pleasure. When did you arrive?”

“Late last evening. I only heard of your bereavement at the Clarendon, and at once hastened to offer you my sympathy—or congratulations.”

“Both, dear Morton, in a certain sense. It is something to be as Byron says, ‘lord of oneself,’ although the death of a parent can never be a subject of rejoicing. You are only just in time. I start for Italy the moment after the funeral.”

“So soon!” exclaimed Sir Frederick, with a gesture of extreme surprise. “Will not the world——” He hesitated.

“Make remarks, eh? Oh, undoubtedly, and welcome. Everybody naturally discusses everybody’s business from the most uncharitable point of view. The fact is, a matter of life and death depends upon my going; but as I do not intend to enlighten the truth-loving public, they must talk and they will, I can stand it.”

Sir Frederick Morton and Lord Dunorven, now Earl of Oxenten, were old school-fellows. In days when age took priority of birth, and fagging was carried to excess, fate chanced to consign the one to the tender mercies of the other; and Morton—generous and gentle, as nature’s giants proverbially are, or should be—so far from abusing the privileges of his position, took

the proud, sensitive boy under his especial care and protection, invested him with the prestige of his own great influence and superiority in all athletic exercises, and effectually shielded him from insult and annoyance. In return, Dunorven conceived for his protector a romantic attachment that grew with his growth and strengthened with his strength, and in early manhood became the master-charm of his existence. The two friends travelled together through Italy, Palestine, and Egypt, and although the young nobleman remained abroad long after Sir Frederick had quietly settled down to the ordinary avocations of a country gentleman, on his return to England, a year previous to the date we are describing, out of the twelve months, full six were spent at Donnington.

The Baronet delighted to surround himself with old schoolmates and fellow colle-

gians. Some of these we may hereafter have occasion to introduce.

There was Captain Lenham of the Guards—good-looking, dashing, and extravagant, but honest and straightforward to a fault. Molyneux Temple, a rising lawyer. The Rev. John Lawrence, a hard-working curate; and Sir Desborough Denton, a dark handsome man of thirty-five, a comparatively recent acquaintance, and the least deserving of all.

Apparently anxious to change the subject of conversation, Lord Oxenten inquired—

“Are you in town for long?”

“No; a few days at the most. By-the-by, you may be able to render me a service. You remember Lawrence—Saint Lawrence as we used to call him in our graceless schoolboy days? We have accidentally heard that he is in great distress, being in delicate health and without a

curacy. My mother has commissioned me to invite both him and Mrs. Lawrence to stay at the Grange until we can get him a presentation. It has just occurred to me that you may have a better chance of helping him than I."

"Not just at the present moment. St. Osyth's was promised by my father, and I must not break his pledged word. However, I will think the matter over. Lord Glengary has several livings in his gift, and may be willing to oblige me, should there be a vacancy between this and the expiration of Donnington hospitality."

"Oh, as to that, my mother and Mary are so fond of Lawrence, that once there, they will not care to part with him."

Lord Oxenten's brow perceptibly darkened.

"You used to like him as a boy."

"I—I beg your pardon, Morton, I was

thinking of something else. Like him, of course I did. There seemed to be a spell against our meeting at your house, but I trust the pleasure of renewing our acquaintance is only postponed. Recollect I have not seen him these seven years. Did you ever meet Mrs. Lawrence during your long friendship with her son?"

"Not until this morning, and now I am completely bewitched. I never saw a more fascinating woman. Although certainly not less than forty-five she is positively lovely."

"You are eloquent, Morton. How did she receive your invitation?"

"With a gratitude that made me ashamed I had not sought her out before. I quite long to introduce her to my mother."

"When do you expect them?"

"On Thursday evening. I shall go

down early in order to be there on their arrival."

"Thursday: and this is Saturday. The funeral is to take place on Wednesday. Will you attend, Morton?"

"If you wish it." And with a mutually warm grasp of the hand, the two friends separated.

When again alone, Lord Oxenten immediately resumed his previous occupation. After he had finished reading the manuscript, he walked impatiently up and down the room, the look of pained irresolution gradually deepening to a heavy frown.

At last.

"It must be done, and at once," he murmured. "God grant I may not have been cruel in my delay."

And hastily penning a few brief lines, he signed, folded, and sealed the paper without trusting himself to glance at it again.

Meanwhile Sir Frederick hurried from that hot room into the cooler air with a sensation of newly gained freedom. Notwithstanding all the attractions of friendship he longed to be alone.

A groom with difficulty able to restrain the high-mettled charger resigned his care with undisguised relief, and springing to the saddle the Baronet leisurely proceeded towards Hyde Park. Drawing bridle at the corner of Piccadilly, he watched, with an abstracted gaze, the busy swarm of equestrians ever undulating to and fro. Many called to him by name; others looked inquiringly, expecting recognition. To the former he scarcely replied; the latter he did not even see. He was in the position of one who, having made a desperate effort to escape from a maze of enchantment, finds himself more and more involved. What is the use of fighting with

Destiny? Better yield to it at once. Turning his horse's head, he rode on quickly, and dismounted before the porch of a large house in Belgravia, consigning Black Harry to the keeping of a gentleman's servant who civilly tendered his assistance. A short sharp ring, a brief question to the obsequious domestic, and the door was closed behind him.

Another hour has come and gone. His errand is over, and he descends the steps once or twice, leaning heavily on the railings. No change has taken place without; the sun still shines as cheerfully as ever, but the heart of that man, so generally calm and self-possessed, beats fast and fiercely with a wild, unavailing sorrow.

Hark, he mutters something to himself as he lays his hand on the saddle-bow.

“Gone, gone, without a trace.”

"Did you speak, sir?" asks the manservant, respectfully touching his cap.

"No—no."

"Can I do anything more?"

"No—nothing, thank you."

And the good-natured lackey goes his way, wondering what makes the strange gentleman so pale.

There is a little street sweeper at the corner to whom Sir Frederick has often given a shilling with a few kind words. It is a happy face that peers out of a mass of tangled brown hair; and the childish figure is graceful and well made, despite the evidences of poverty in the tattered garment and attenuated features. Willie Grey wants to be spoken to again. Not to-day, little sweeper, he has no thought to waste on such as thee.

What a contrast between the rider of that proud steed, the owner of uncounted wealth,

the heir of a time-honoured name, whose slightest wish is law to a whole village: and the poor half-starved outcast of society, who, fatherless and motherless, has neither home nor kindred; no friend in the world save one well-nigh as friendless as himself.

Strange contrast between the two!

And yet the one possesses information which at that moment the other would give half his fortune to acquire!





CHAPTER III.

“ONLY A FACE AT A WINDOW.”

THE Earl's decease occurred in London, but the funeral was arranged to take place at a pretty country village which formed part of the Oxenten estate. The morning rose bright and cloudless, consequently a large concourse of persons of all ranks and ages assembled in and near the churchyard; less perhaps to do honour to the memory of the departed than to gratify the morbid curiosity that loves to dwell on the gloomy accessories of death.

Morton was there according to promise, and he and Sir Desborough Denton walked

after the young Earl, who, as chief mourner, headed the procession.

Sir Frederick's worn and altered countenance bore traces of much inward suffering. A recent attack of illness served as an excuse to the gay companion at his side (who, by the way, seemed strangely out of place in that lugubrious scene), but by those who had no warrant save externals, his evident depression was not unnaturally attributed to grief at the loss of the departed. On this occasion Morton was unconsciously playing the rôle of a hypocrite. His acquaintance with the late Earl had been extremely slight, and his being there at all was simply out of regard to his friend. No other relatives were present. Like Sir Frederick, Lord Oxenten was the only known representative of his race.

After the funeral solemnities were over,

the three friends stood talking together at a little distance from the hired train of mourners. The rectory overlooked that side of the churchyard, divided from it by a narrow lawn, in breadth not more than fifteen or twenty paces. At an upper window, surrounded by a trellis-work of jessamine, appeared three young faces of the true Anglo-Saxon type, two girls and a boy, the children of the rector, evidently looking on with mingled awe and curiosity. Behind them, half hidden by the curtain, was a lady, with pale beautiful features. If any one had been near enough to notice, he might have observed a convulsive movement in the lip, and a wild light in the full dark eye, as the Earl and his companions came up to the rectory grounds. The little white hands clenched either in pain or displeasure, and one foot beat impatiently on the carpet; but nothing was heard without,

save the silvery voices of the children, and the breeze softly murmuring around the casement. Once, and once only, when Sir Desborough made the remark, "What very pretty, fairy-like creatures!" and the three gentlemen simultaneously directed their attention to the unconscious prattlers, the pale face drew back into the shadow with a sudden start, and a half-uttered moan. Strange to say, that sound, faint as it was, caught the ear of one of the spectators, and a slight sympathetic shudder passed rapidly from heart to brain.

At that moment the young Earl turned to give some orders to his servant.

"How awfully white Oxenten is, and by my faith, Morton, you do not seem much better. Ugh, I hate coming to a funeral."

And the gay Baronet put up his glass to have another look at the rector's children.

Could he have raised himself a step, he

might have seen a pair of dark passionate eyes, one instant dry and tearless, the next quenched by the pressure of an irresistible tenderness, still, whether in sorrow or anger, directed towards the little group of which just then he chanced to form the centre.





CHAPTER IV.

HOW LADY MORTON PLANNED TO MARRY HER SON.



R. and Mrs. Lawrence were warmly welcomed by the hospitable owners of the Grange. Greatly prepossessed by her son's description, seconded by her own generally correct impressions, it seemed as if Lady Morton could scarcely do enough to testify her regard for the interesting widow, and a cordial friendship soon sprang up between them.

There were several other visitors, some of whom we must incidentally describe. Lady Morton was bent on seeing her son,

married, and in pursuance of this desirable end, had spent the short interval of his absence in considering how she should bring together a number of young ladies, all of whom might more or less deserve the distinguished honour of the Morton alliance. Let us do her justice : she did not look out for money. Her character, notwithstanding some slight severity, was that of a good and noble-minded woman. She did not care that Sir Frederick's bride should be an heiress ; indeed, her choice could hardly fall on such a one, for hers was that species of refined pride which delights in giving rather than receiving. It would ill beseem her son to be in any sense indebted to his wife.

The future Lady Morton must be essentially a lady, of good breeding and high birth ; amiable, accomplished, and elegant. As to money, that was quite another ques-

tion. Beauty? Well, she did not much think that Frederick would be likely to fall in love with any girl who did not possess considerable personal attractions, and accordingly only issued invitations to the best-looking of her numerous acquaintance.

Among the first to accept the proffered hospitality of Donnington, were the Dowager Lady Glendon and her two unmarried daughters. Both these young ladies were exceedingly pretty, and, which in their case might be thought an advantage, a decided contrast to each other. Gertrude, the elder, was a brilliant brunette with pearly teeth and flashing eyes; but she had not sufficient softness of manner to content the anxious mother. There was a good deal of temper in her face, and the doubt whether she would be likely to prove a submissive and affectionate wife could not be satisfactorily determined. Her

sister Florence was unquestionably her superior. Grecian features, wearing an habitual expression of placidity and gentleness, finely-arched eyebrows and deep penetrating blue eyes, the very reflection of tenderness itself, formed an exquisite picture set in a framework of gold. That soft golden hair completed the conquest of Lady Morton's heart. Might it only prove equally successful with Sir Frederick!

The last, and, in our opinion, the most interesting-looking of the trio, was Marion Hayes, the daughter of a retired London banker, himself the grandson of a nobleman.

Slightly but elegantly formed, Marion Hayes was in the highest degree refined and graceful. Rich chestnut hair surrounded in a double roll a small well-shaped head, while large hazel eyes, fringed by lashes of the softest brown, looked shyly

out beneath a pure white brow. In the evening, or when flushed by exercise and excitement, she was radiantly beautiful; at other times her complexion might be thought by some rather wanting in colour; but her features were faultless, and her powers of fascination irresistible, so that in most instances, as Lady Morton expressed it, "to see her was to love."

Her disposition would be difficult to describe. She possessed one of those half-formed characters that seem to require the chisel of circumstance or time before the closest observation can determine to what order they belong. She was generally considered amiable—most young ladies of beauty and fortune have little temptation to be otherwise—she could be generous; gentle and outwardly unselfish she was undoubtedly. Everything about her had a touch and finish peculiarly her own; and

we all know how many serious failings may be kept out of sight by a polished and lady-like exterior. As to the rest, our readers must judge for themselves.

Now it so happened that Sir Frederick had invited three of his friends to follow him to the Grange, exclusive of John Lawrence and the fascinating widow. These were Captain Lenham, Molyneux Temple, and Sir Desborough Denton. Lady Morton was much embarrassed: not on account of the requisite accommodation, but the presence of three dashing bachelors would certainly not conduce to the furtherance of her scheme. Either they would attract the greater part of Sir Frederick's attention to themselves, or, worse still, by their devotion to the young ladies, more or less throw him into the shade. However, she was too wise a tactician not to conceal her mortification from the individual

most interested, and she welcomed her son's guests with natural urbanity.

The first few days passed without anything deserving remark. The Baronet's cheek may have been paler than its wont—that was easily accounted for by the London illness—but he exerted himself to the utmost to render their stay agreeable to his visitors, and apparently succeeded, for the different parts of the puzzle fitted to perfection.

Lady Morton, nevertheless, was scarcely satisfied with the progress of events.

Her son's gallantry was so evidently the result of pure kind-heartedness, that not a single action under its most favourable aspect could possibly be construed into an approach to a more tender feeling.

One sultry afternoon, Lady Morton having driven out alone to visit some of the old cottagers on the Donnington estate, the whole party, left to their own devices,

adjourned to the Wilderness, a miniature forest a quarter of a mile distant from the house. Here they dispersed, and when their hostess returning from her drive, came in search of the wanderers, the only information she could obtain from any of them, as to what had become of their companions, was, "Oh, I daresay they are somewhere in the wood."

The first of whom she asked this question was her own daughter Mary, who was reclining on a low invalid's couch, which John Lawrence had himself brought for her from the Grange. The young curate's health was already partially restored, and he looked as he felt—thoroughly at home. The questioner's glance may have fallen searchingly on both, but as they were perfectly unconcerned and calm, merely enjoying each other's society, she passed on without a shade of apprehension.

Lady Glendon, Marion Hayes, and Gertrude were sketching through an opening, while at a little distance Sir Desborough Denton and Molyneux Temple were carving initials on a tree. Lenham had been with them half an hour before, but had suddenly gone off by himself, no one knew whither. Florence was supposed to be with Mary.

Lady Morton's heart beat high with hope and self-congratulation: Sir Frederick was also missing. Were they, then, together?

Without saying anything to undeceive her friend, she rambled on to the confines of the wood, too engrossed by her pleasant day-dream to indulge a thought of fatigue. Presently the accents of a well-known voice reached her through the foliage.

“Good, kind, and gentle as you are, you would make any——”

The concluding part was lost; but “you would make any man happy,” formed the natural sequence in Lady Morton’s imagination, of course in reply to some self-disparaging remark.

Had matters progressed so favourably?

Involuntarily she listened for the answer. It came very low and soft. The words were indistinct, but the tone was unmistakably a woman’s.





CHAPTER V.

COMPLICATIONS.



WHEN Lady Morton reached the Grange, she found the dinner ready, and several of her guests still absent. Florence and Sir Frederick might be easily excused. Captain Lenham had arranged to dine out one evening; this was probably the day; but Mrs. Lawrence, dear gentle Mrs. Lawrence, was nowhere to be found, and her kind hostess took alarm at the idea that perhaps the interesting widow might be ill.

However, as "John" did not manifest much anxiety upon the subject, and no one ever waited dinner at Donnington, after

two servants had been despatched in opposite directions, the business of the hour was proceeded with.

At dessert Sir Frederick came in.

“It was so hot, I did not want any dinner, dear mother,” said he, laughingly.

“I daresay not, you graceless boy, but what have you done with Florence? You ought at least to show some consideration for her appetite.”

Lady Morton felt sure of her ground, and was in extreme good humour. Very ill-prepared for the look of blank astonishment with which Sir Frederick greeted her inquiry.

“Florence! Miss Glendon? Is she not here?” He glanced hastily round the table. “Oh, Lenham is absent too. Depend upon it, mother, they have lost their way, and will come home together presently.”

This conjecture was hardly sufficient for Lady Glendon, who had been frequently assured that her daughter was safe under Sir Frederick's escort. She was now seriously anxious.

"And Mrs. Lawrence, Frederick?" urged Lady Morton, endeavouring to hide her disappointment.

"Is dreadfully tired, and gone to lie down. Dear Lady Glendon, pray be comforted. I will go in search of the runaways. There is not the slightest occasion for alarm; we have no bad characters in the neighbourhood. Lawrence—Temple, keep your seats. Sir Desborough, I beg of you——"

And having by a mixture of entreaty and command succeeded in restoring some degree of order he hurried from the room.

Florence and Lenham, as Sir Frederick suggested, had contrived to lose their way,

and when, under the guidance of a cottager, they regained the Park enclosure, both were, or fancied themselves, so much fatigued that they sat down to rest on the trunk of a large tree. Dessert was over when they reached the Grange, and Mary Morton had retired for the night. After a hasty greeting to Lady Glendon, who was too much delighted at her daughter's safety to manifest any serious displeasure, Florence rushed upstairs, only too glad to escape a scolding for what the least rigid of our readers may be tempted to regard as an inexcusable breach of decorum.

Her mistake respecting Sir Frederick's companion was not the only mortification that Lady Morton was destined to endure that afternoon and evening. During her solitary ramble in the wilderness, her foot accidentally struck against something in the grass. Stooping down to see what it

was, she found a small green pocket-book. In raising it, the clasp came unfastened in her hand, and a slip of paper containing a lock of soft dark hair fell to the ground. Completely engrossed by her own reflections, she took little notice of it at the time, but, carefully replacing the enclosure, put it in her pocket, intending to make inquiry for the owner directly she returned to the Grange. In her subsequent vexation she had entirely forgotten it.

As she sat alone in her boudoir, endeavouring to collect her thoughts before retiring to rest, it suddenly occurred to her. In taking it out, the hasp became entangled in the folds of her dress, and as if by a fatality again flew open.

There lay the folded paper with the glossy curl beneath—a woman's hair of the richest, deepest brown. The bright light of the lamp flashed across it as she

held it in her hand, and some pencilled writing met her eye. It was merely a date, "April 14th, 18—." But Lady Morton started and shivered as if stricken by an unexpected blow: then looked again and again, quickly and eagerly. The same bold characteristic handwriting covered the pages of the unpretending little volume. No, she could not be mistaken.

Closing it hurriedly to drive away temptation, she buried her face in her left hand, vainly endeavouring to find a satisfactory solution. Her back was towards the door. There was a knock, but she did not hear it. The knock was repeated; a third time with a similar result. The next moment a hand was laid upon her shoulder.

"Give me that, mother. It is mine."

The voice was Sir Frederick's. Low, harsh, almost menacing, it differed strangely

from his accustomed tone. Involuntarily she turned to look into his countenance.

The angry flush died out as his glance met hers.

“I have not read it, Frederick. I found it in the wood this afternoon, and forgot to mention it on my return.”

True in the main, though she had seen enough to render her uneasy; a mother’s anxiety to spare him unnecessary pain straining the point with truth. Not right, not wise, but natural.

An indescribable expression of relief stole over those haughty features.

One moment only.

Is he gone without a word—without even wishing her good-night—her—his mother?

As Sir Frederick descended the stairs, Lenham called to him by name.

“Come out on the lawn ; it is a glorious night.”

And so it was. The moon had risen in unexampled beauty. Far as the eye could reach, the spire of the distant church, the romantic little village, the quiet homesteads and snow-white cottages dotting the landscape at intervals, were as clearly outlined as in mid-day splendour, while the trees and groves on either side of the house seemed to have donned a purple robe in their deep shade where the grey-blue sky swept down to the horizon.

No sound of animated life above, around, beneath. The very birds were gone to sleep. Not all.

“Hark !”

The three call-notes of the nightingale rang shrilly and mournfully from a neighbouring elm, followed by a rush of melody such as no feathered songster in our

clime, nor perhaps, to English ears, in any other clime can rival; so soft, so touching, rising and falling in strange melancholy cadence, a requiem for the by-gone day.

It ceased, and then boom, boom, the great clock in the hall struck twelve.

As the last clang died out, the surrounding stillness became almost oppressive by the contrast; but for some minutes neither Sir Frederick nor Lenham seemed inclined to interrupt it. Both were sunk in reverie, gazing on that fairy-like scenery as though spell-bound by its loveliness.

“A glorious heritage, Morton. Many a peer in England might envy you an ancestral home like this.”

“Possibly. ’Tis a fine old place. And yet——”

“And yet—what?”

“I was thinking that which we hold

without effort is apt to lose half its charm in possession."

"True in some cases, but surely not in yours?"

Sir Frederick did not answer. A weary expression came into his face; and then, for the first time, Lenham noticed how very pale he was. In the moonlight his features looked drawn and haggard.

"Morton, you are not well? What is it?"

"Nothing, at least nothing that I can tell you, Harry. Talk to me of something else. Self is more or less a skeleton to us all. Where did you go this morning?"

"Down to the Lower Farm, where I saw a venerable old man with snow-white hair and beard, who told me more about you and yours than I might otherwise have learnt in a lifetime. He seemed as if he could talk of nothing but the Grange and

the Squire. In fact, his opinion of you soared so far above the average that I began to question with myself whether such an exalted individual could be really any friend of mine."

Sir Frederick laughed faintly.

"Poor old Brooks! Did you see his granddaughter Mary, or Minnie as they generally call her?"

"No. Why?"

"She is a perfect Hebe, light-hearted and sure-footed as a mountain roe, and as innocently graceful in her movements. A true type of rustic beauty, a little softened in the outline; her parents belonged to the better class of husbandmen. Rarely shy, for she has nothing to fear, frank and open, but with an enchanting natural modesty that beats all the affectation of the day. You must go and see her, Lenham. However, take care what you say."

“What do you mean?”

“Only that I am the sworn enemy of any man above her station who abstracts more than a smile from my Donnington Rose.”

“Does he love her?” thought Lenham, as he wished his friend good-night. “Surely not. Can it be Florence Glendon?”





CHAPTER VI.

CROSS PURPOSES.



It was the last evening in May. The Donnington party and their guests were all assembled in the large drawing-room, probably in olden times the banqueting-hall of the Grange, when Lady Glendon and her daughters having arranged everything for their departure on the morrow, Sir Frederick suddenly announced his intention of accompanying them.

His mother's eye met his anxiously.

"I shall not be away long," he added, in answer to her unspoken inquiry.

“You will come with us to Glendon Hall,” eagerly interposed the Dowager. “Hugh will be delighted.”

“Thank you, dear Lady Glendon, but I am going up on business, and do not wish to be away beyond the 4th.”

“Cannot you dine with us one day?”

“I am afraid not. Business and pleasure rarely fit together; besides, my steward is besieging me with petitions for repairs which ought to have been seen to before. I must be back as soon as possible.”

Lady Morton’s countenance brightened. Notwithstanding a certain ambiguity of language she had not heard him speak so like himself for months. What this business might be she did not ask, whereas, had no positive anxiety existed, the inquiry would have come out naturally. So different, even in minutiae, is the acted from the real.

“Cannot you put it off, Fred?” pleaded Mary from a distant sofa, whither she and Florence had recently retired: Mary wearily reclining, while the golden-haired beauty sat on a low stool at her feet. “Cannot you put it off? Must you go at once?”

This appeal instantly brought Sir Frederick to the side of the two friends.

“My dear sister, I must; there is no help for it. Miss Glendon, I wish you could stay with us. Mary will miss you sadly.”

Sir Desborough Denton, his lip curled by a half-sarcastic smile, stood watching Morton with the air of a man who thinks he sees farther than his fellows. Marion Hayes in turn was watching him with the natural bias for misinterpretation so inherent in humanity.

“You will be very lonely to-morrow.”

“I? No. Why?”

Marion rashly attempted to look her meaning, while a light jest rose to her lip; then meeting her companion's glance, she faltered and turned pale.

The magnetism of the eye; how little recognised, and yet how potent in effect. The window of the soul, corrupt or holy, whence the stronger will looks out to intimidate the weaker.

“Absurd! As if I could care for that flaxen-haired doll. You know better, Marion,” he whispered in a lower tone, bending over her till his dark moustache almost swept her hair. “There is a fatality in our being constantly thrown together. You have regal loveliness, but even you should think twice before you throw away a chance like that.”

At this moment Sir Frederick came up, addressing them conjointly.

“I hope you will not consider me uncourteous. Unfortunately, business must be attended to, and mine is not of a nature to bear delay. Denton, I rely on you and Lawrence to entertain the ladies.”

“To the best of my ability. Shall you be away long, Morton?”

“Three or four days at the most. There is a parish meeting on the fifth, and I may have to try my hand at arguing. I meant to accomplish everything when last in town, but through not being well and Dunorven’s leaving, my good intentions fell to the ground.”

“By-the-by, where is Lord Oxenten now?”

“You know as much as I do. He started for Florence without giving an address, and I have not the slightest clue to his whereabouts.”

“When I last saw him he struck me as

looking extremely ill. How terribly down he was that morning!"

"Possibly," rejoined Morton, drily. "The circumstances were not exactly calculated to promote his cheerfulness."

"Granted: but I have very good grounds for believing that the late Lord Oxenten was no friend to his son, and Dunorven is not the man to affect a sorrow that he does not really feel."

"Denton!" exclaimed Sir Frederick, in a hurried, almost angry whisper, as Marion Hayes, with instinctive good-breeding, crossed the room to speak to Lady Morton, "how can you talk so in the presence of a comparative stranger? Pray let the subject drop. I know no more of the causes of Dunorven's uneasiness than you do. A discussion without any fact to support it is both unkind and unwise."

Sir Desborough's answer was lost in a

summons to tea, but a passing frown contracted his handsome features.

Three days later.

With pale cheek and firmly compressed lip, Sir Frederick Morton again stood before the door of the aristocratic-looking residence in Belgravia to which we have previously referred. This time his stay was not of long duration—he left in about twenty minutes; a cutting sarcasm, a few cold words the sole result of an interview on which he had unwittingly built so much! He did not, he would not believe the half of what they told him, but he had no means of disproving it, and the idea stung him into madness. Heedless whither he was going, he walked on mechanically until he found himself in a narrow street at some little distance from the noisy thoroughfare of Holborn. Here he stopped, weary and out of breath. If the end of his exer-

tion was simply fatigue, he had amply succeeded.

Presently he hailed a returning cab, and promising the driver an extra shilling if he would make good speed, sprang in hastily, just as a ragged boy emerged from the corner of a neighbouring alley.

“Hi, stop!”

Vain call to a cabman who is sure of his fare.

However, the boy was not discouraged. Starting off as fast as his legs could carry him, he might perhaps have come up with the lumbering vehicle, had not his foot unluckily struck against the kerb-stone, occasioning a heavy fall, at the same time upsetting an old woman's apple-stall, sending her wares flying in all directions like a tumbler's balls. It was our old friend little Willie Grey, who thereupon was incontinently assailed by a shower of un-

courteous epithets and reproaches from the bystanders, accompanied by several hearty cuffs and kicks from the stout limbs of the indignant dame, which, in his prostrate condition, half smothered by the apples, he was unable to avoid. When he at length recovered his breath and his feet, the cab had disappeared.

The little street-sweeper's sunshiny face was overshadowed for a moment, but the large intelligent brown eyes soon flashed out again as brightly as ever. He stood still awhile watching the old woman gather up her merchandize, though without venturing to offer his assistance, and then with the philosophic reflection—

“Well, 'tain't no use,” walked on briskly, whistling as he went.



CHAPTER VII.

TOO LATE.



WE must now ask the reader to accompany us to a very different scene.

In one of the apartments of a beautiful Italian villa, a short distance from Florence, Lord Oxenten stood alone. He had only just arrived, and there was an expression of feverish impatience on his countenance, as every now and then he glanced eagerly towards the door.

Presently a woman entered.

“Will you come now, Signor? There is no immediate danger.”

The Earl started and shuddered, then followed her without reply.

In less than half an hour he returned, closed the door abruptly, and throwing himself on a couch lay like one suddenly deprived of consciousness or life. He was not asleep, though the heavy eyelids drooped, and finally compressed, as if to shut out some painful vision. He was not asleep, but he was sick at heart, desolate and alone.

“Too late, too late !”

Words that were felt rather than uttered, but felt in all their torturing simplicity. Tell us that happiness is forfeited for ever. Tell us not that we have lost it by delay.

The evening was already far advanced, and the open windows admitted a cooler atmosphere from the vale of the Arno, while the moon's silvery light falling on the pale grey of the olive lent a visionary

and Elysian appearance to the landscape. The soft, melancholy music of some distant serenade, followed by the accents of a fine contralto voice, floated dreamily on the breeze, gently whispering of love and happiness and joy; but the sounds were evidently distressing to Lord Oxenten, and once or twice he turned aside, endeavouring to avoid hearing them.

Hour after hour passed away unheeded. Midnight gradually drew near; midnight in Italy—the land of dreams, melody, and song! The villa commanded a good view of Florence and the whole vale of the Arno. Florence the fair, surrounded by delicious groves, gardens, and terraces, rising one above another. Beautiful Florence, birth-place of the immortal Dante, lovely at all times, most so when seen at night beneath the chastened splendour of an Italian summer; but the young Earl, a prey to

the most bitter recollections, had no sense for anything external.

As the clock struck twelve an old servant came in, bearing a tray with refreshments and a lamp, which he placed on the table.

“I knocked twice, my lord.”

Lord Oxenten took no notice, he did not even seem to hear; and the old servant, a Dane who had played with him in childhood, and been the confidant of all his boyish perplexities, looked on sorrowfully. At last he knelt down by the side of the couch, taking the Earl's hand between his own, with a reverential tenderness entirely devoid of undue familiarity.

“My dear, dear master, don't — pray don't.”

A large tear fell slowly. Age weeping for the vicissitudes of youth.

“It is terrible, Christian. I can neither reason nor think.”

“Don’t try to do either, my dear lord, only bear up as well as you can. Remember it is God’s will.”

“I cannot remember anything except that scene, that heartrending scene.”

“My lady may recover.”

“Christian, I dare not hope. It is said to be hereditary. I knew it when I married her. Any great mental excitement might have brought it on, but my love—my——”

He broke down, completely overcome; then after a pause—

“Poor injured Lucia, how faithfully she kept my secret. Were it not that he is gone to his account, there are times when, God forgive me, I could almost curse my father.”

Faint from exhaustion and want of rest and food, he could scarcely speak. Christian rose, and poured out a glass of wine.

Lord Oxenten would have refused, but, noting the shadow of disappointment on the old man's face, he took it silently.

"To think that a few weeks might have saved her! My guilty cowardice! Oh, it is horrible, horrible!"

And again he closed his eyes with a shudder.

"My dear lord, do not harass yourself by reflections on what might have been. Trust to my fidelity, all that can be done shall be done; I implore you to take some repose."

"I cannot, I cannot. You know what it is, Christian?"

"I do know, my dear lord, too well. If you could only sleep——"

"I thought to be so happy. I had arranged everything, planned everything——"

"Too much, too much—God does it."

“Christian, you will drive me mad.”

He spoke fiercely, with the petulance of a wronged child, raising himself upon his elbow. Christian dared not attempt remonstrance, and had great difficulty in persuading him to go to bed, where, though still maintaining his inability to sleep, tired nature finally asserted her rights, and he fell into an uneasy slumber.

Satisfied on this point, the faithful attendant stole softly downstairs, and crossing a paved court with a marble fountain in the centre, entered the opposite side of the house. After listening for some moments on the threshold he ascended several steps, and passing through a long corridor, came to a door fastened from within. Here he knocked, and was speedily admitted. It was a small room opening into a larger one beyond. The same woman who had previously spoken to Lord

Oxenten was seated on a low chair gently pushing a swing cradle.

“I thought you would never come. Will you have the young master now?”

“Yes. Is he asleep?”

“Asleep! Not he: no signs of it either. His great black eyes have been wandering about the ceiling for the last half hour.”

And the baby Viscount set up a loud cooing to certify them of his wakefulness.

“Hear him, the pretty dear.”

Christian stepped forward, and leant over the cot, smoothing down the coverlet with his left hand. The little waxen fingers in ever restless motion at once laid hold of the intruder, and their soft, unconscious pressure took the old man back full five and forty years.

“How did you manage?”

“The Signora asked for water: we had the

mixture prepared, and she fell asleep in less than twenty minutes."

"Good. Are the rooms all ready?"

"Everything but the crib. The child may as well go in it. He wont be asleep this hour."

"No, give him to me."

And the baby face, with the large inquisitive eyes, turned hither and thither in all directions, mutely seeking an explanation of the problem world, is laid lovingly on the old man's breast.





CHAPTER VIII.

DEATH OR LIFE?

MANY times during the night Christian stood anxiously at the door of his master's chamber, listening with painful solicitude to the broken words and incoherent sentences that every now and then fell from the lips of the slumberer.

Morning dawned ; mid-day came with all its brightness and glory ; still no summons. At last, unable to bear the suspense, he entered the room.

The Earl was evidently delirious. His eyes were wide open, and without noticing the presence of Christian, he continued

talking to himself in a wild, unconnected manner. Greatly alarmed, the faithful old servant immediately sent for an English physician who was fortunately staying with his family at Florence.

The moment Dr. Carvell had made himself acquainted with the symptoms of his patient, he pronounced him to be suffering from a violent attack of brain fever.

“His present state ought to be instantly made known to his relations. In a case like this one must be prepared for emergencies. I should strongly advise you to write at once.”

“Ah, sir, it is unnecessary. He is the last of his race—save——”

The old man started, and checked himself, but Dr. Carvell was intently gazing at the unconscious object of his sympathy, and took no notice of the implied exception.

“Poor young fellow! He is singularly

handsome. I do not think I ever saw a more interesting countenance. Are you——”

He stopped, slightly embarrassed. Christian wore no livery, and his demeanour was far above his station.

“His servant, sir; only his faithful and attached servant.”

“Your master’s name, I think you said was Ellice?”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Arthur Ellice.”

Lord Oxenten was travelling incognito.

“Ellice, Ellice. The name strikes me as being familiar. I fancy I must have met with some Ellices in Florence.”

“They were not related to my master, sir.”

“Possibly not. Well, well, this is a sad case—a very sad case; but we must do what we can.”

Christian drew his hand across his eyes.

"My good friend," added the physician, kindly, "I do not wish to needlessly distress you. Much depends on careful nursing. This I must leave entirely to you. Are you in his confidence?"

"Why, sir, I think I may honestly say yes. Mr. Ellice has known and trusted me from his infancy."

"That is fortunate. A confidential attendant is a great boon. One can never be on one's guard against delirium. All secrets are unsafe when the mind has lost its rudder."

"You may rely on me, sir. While my strength lasts, I shall never leave him. You think there is danger."

"Danger? Why, yes. It is impossible to say what turn the disease will take."

As Dr. Carvell rose to depart, a sudden thought occurred to him.

"You are not an Englishman, are you?"

“No, sir, a Dane. But the last five and thirty years of my life were spent in the service of—Mr. Ellice’s father.”

“I see. My patient will be in good hands. Should he recover you must be careful to spare him any recurrence of anxiety. A shock to the nervous system might be fatal.”

The kind physician then left a prescription with sundry directions, promising to call early in the morning.

Night and day succeeded each other with feverish alternations of despair and hope. Poor Christian could trace no visible amendment—the Earl never once recognised his faithful follower. No ray of present consciousness flashed across the darkness of delirium; no word of lucid import met the ear of the anxious watcher—all was miserable incoherency.

The ninth day there was a crisis. Dr.

Carvell called at eight A.M., and, after a moment's consideration, turned gravely to Christian—

“Towards evening you must be prepared for a change. If he wake in possession of his senses, he will do well; if not, no human skill can save him.”





CHAPTER IX.

CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN.



CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN, the Earl's faithful and affectionate attendant, was the only son of a rich merchant of Copenhagen, who failed when fortune seemed to favour him most, and, unable to bear the disgrace of not fulfilling his engagements, died of grief. Thus, suddenly translated from sunshine to shade, the young man's heart was crushed. An unhappy attachment embittered his reverses, and powerless to support existence in a neighbourhood where all had once been for him so different, he wandered from place to place,

seeking a precarious livelihood by hiring himself to any who were willing to accept his services.

Years passed, unmarked save by a long career of misery, until, homeless and friendless in the streets of London, he had the good fortune on one occasion to rescue the late Lord Oxenten from robbery and murder. The proud English peer was not ungrateful ; he took the destitute foreigner into his household, and relying on the proverbial honesty of the Danish character, promoted him by trust approved from one office to another, and finally made him his steward and confidential adviser in matters of business.

But the Earl was naturally too stern to long manifest any particular regard towards an inferior in rank ; and not until the infant Dunorven was put into his arms did Christian feel that he had any one to love.

Lady Oxenten died in giving birth to her son ; the marriage had been anything but happy, and perhaps this circumstance contributed to create the breach between the Earl and his young heir. Be that as it may, it is certain that as the boy grew up he regarded Christian with filial affection. When scarcely four years old he would steal away from the presence of his stern sire, his nurse or governess, to show Christian the bruised limb or broken toy, and solicit his help. It was Christian who held his head, and carried him for hours during the maladies incidental to childhood : and when he went to school, it was Christian who accompanied him to the gate, who led his little pony to meet him at the stage, and caught him in his arms on his return. It was Christian to whom he looked for protection in all his boyish escapades, who felt the strongest interest in his juvenile prowess,

and, above all, shared and sympathized with his romantic attachment to his friend Morton, then the leader and champion of the school.

The intense heat declined by slow degrees, and the cool of evening fell on the thirsty earth.

Lord Oxenten slept calmly and peacefully; the breeze from the vale of the Arno playing round his forehead.

Far as the eye could reach, a profusion of aromatic flowers covered the slopes, and exhaled additional perfumes as the sun went down. Near one of the bridges that crossed the river lay the gardens of Boboli. Terraces covered with bay and myrtle (above which rose several towers almost entirely concealed by ivy) looked down on the white statues of fauns and sylvas faintly glimmering below; while in the

distance frowned the ancient fort of Belvidere. Wherever the hum of life went on, no sound was heard in the sick-room. For a time Christian gazed mournfully on the gorgeous scene around him, and then, kneeling by the bedside of his beloved master, he fell asleep, thoroughly worn out by long watching and fatigue. His head bowed in the attitude of prayer, he did not know that the dark presence which had haunted him for so many nights and days was even then departing, while a single ray of light falling full on his silvery hair, seemed like a messenger of comfort from the borders of the unknown land.

Presently a voice came through the stillness.

“Christian, Christian.”

Still he stirred not.

“Christian, dear old Christian.”

Lord Oxenten was wide awake, looking

round him with the curious glance of long unconscious illness. Finding words were ineffectual, he laid his hand on the old man's shoulder. The effect of that light touch was instantaneous. Christian uttered an exclamation of irrepressible joy as the great weight crushing down his heart was suddenly rolled away.

“Thank God!”

One thought of gratitude to heaven, then back to earth again.

“My dear, dear master.”

“Where am I, Christian? This is not England?”

“No, my lord. Italy—Florence.” The last word was spoken with an effort, as if in dread of what might follow. “Your lordship has been very ill,” he added, hurriedly.

“Ah! misery, now I begin to recollect. Ill! Good heavens, how long? And Lucia? The child?”

“Nine days, my lord.”

“Lucia, Lucia, what of her?”

“My lady is—much about the same,” replied the old man reluctantly, alarmed at the Earl’s imperative and agitated tone.

“I must see her, see her at once, I want to judge for myself.”

“My dear lord,” exclaimed Christian, piteously, “if not for my sake nor your own, yet for hers, for hers,” he reiterated, with emphasis, “I implore you to be calm. Lady Oxenten’s life is hanging by a thread. Do not throw away your greatest chance of happiness.”

“Then there is hope? Christian, tell me there is hope!” And with a momentary accession of strength he grasped the old man’s hand, looking into his face with eager, ravenous eyes.

“There is hope,” rejoined Christian, speaking sadly against his own convic-

tion, "there is hope if you will only try to be patient."

"And the child—our child?" There was an indescribable pathos in the Earl's voice as he lingered over the last two words.

"My young lord is as well as can be, and growing very fast. Your lordship would be surprised to see how he takes notice."

"Poor little fellow! Thank you, old friend." And with a deep sigh the young nobleman turned away, either endeavouring to conceal his feelings, or, as Christian hoped, to sleep.





CHAPTER X.

THE EARL'S STORY.



WHEN Dr. Carvell arrived, he was overwhelmed with benedictions from Christian, and on entering Lord Oxenten's room, found they were not entirely undeserved.

The Earl extended his hand with a gesture of gratitude and welcome. He would have spoken, but the Doctor at once forbade any approach to conversation.

"Rest, quiet, freedom from anxiety, and all will be well. Neglect these precautions, and I cannot answer for the consequences."

Having thus, as he imagined, duly im-

pressed old Christian, he turned to his patient with a benevolent smile.

“Hard lines, Mr. Ellice, but I want to see you soon restored to health.”

Lord Oxenten started: the unfamiliar name grated on his ear. Pressing one hand to his head, he looked wistfully in the physician's face. Although by no means handsome, that face was well calculated to inspire confidence. The broad, intellectual forehead, the penetrating glance of the candid eyes, the thoughtful mouth, compressed yet kind; the decided character looming largely through the general suavity of manner, impressed the beholder with an involuntary feeling of respect.

None of these external signs were lost upon Lord Oxenten.

“Christian, leave us.”

“My dear sir, pray do not excite yourself by talking. Cannot you put it off till

to-morrow? Be wise: wait till you are stronger."

"Dr. Carvell, I must speak with you. The uncertainty of my recovery makes it necessary that I should do so at once."

Without waiting a reply, he went on hurriedly—

"I see you are not aware of my travelling under an assumed name. My father, the late Lord Oxenten, held the not uncommon notion that a peer should marry his equal in rank—a creed that was the indirect cause of all my after unhappiness. When last in Italy, now about eighteen months ago, I stayed some weeks at Venice, and one day, having nothing better to do, strolled into the old church of San Giovanni e Paolo, intending to inspect that masterpiece of Titian, the martyrdom of the hermits St. Paul and St. Peter. High Mass was being performed, and becoming

interested in the different groups of devotees, I lost sight of my previous intention, amusing myself by watching the many beautiful faces scattered here and there around me. One in particular attracted my attention. It was that of a young girl, apparently about fifteen, perfect in grace and outline, still more remarkable for angelic sweetness of expression. It is useless to dwell upon what followed. Lucia Tramaglino was an orphan destined for the veil: but we loved one another. Mine was not a disposition to delay, and after a few stolen interviews I persuaded her to entrust her happiness to my keeping, and fly with me from Venice. We travelled all night, and the next morning were privately married by a village curé whom I had heavily bribed to perform the ceremony. The following day our marriage was again solemnized before the British Consul at

Trieste. I loved her, oh, how I loved her! God help me, how passionately I love her still. But I must tell you that before we were married I accidentally ascertained there was insanity in her family. She did not know it, poor child; she was not personally acquainted with any of her relatives, and, for my own part, her isolation from domestic ties seemed to rivet my affection. Three months passed in a delirium of happiness—happiness that made me forgetful of everything on earth except my wife. Then, like a thunderbolt in the sanctity of Paradise, came a stern, brief message from my father, demanding my immediate return. How I tore myself away, how I reached England, and went through the various hollow ceremonies imposed upon me by society, I will not attempt to tell you. But my poor darling! We corresponded regularly until——”

The thin white hands quivered and clenched as if to gain a momentary strength.

“During my father’s last illness I received a note from her confidential attendant, informing me of the birth of a son, and imploring me in her name to write at once, and fix the time for our reunion. My heart was torn. I ought to have been with her at that time above all others, but I had not courage to incur the displeasure of my dying father by choosing such a moment to reveal our secret. He lingered many months. I wrote all that love and tenderness could dictate, promising to be with her very soon. I heard again and again—several times from Lucia herself. All seemed to be going on well. Unfortunately, my last letter never reached her, and the anguish of suspense, and, as her attendants told me afterwards, a dread of

my death, brought on a kind of low fever, and ultimately affected her reason. I started for Italy the moment after the funeral, and arrived—too late! When I saw her she was insane, crying and laughing by turns. When I spoke to her she did not know me in the least; when I offered to caress her, she repulsed me with aversion.”

There were great drops of agony on the Earl's brow. Dr. Carvell wiped them away, and again entreated him to be calm.

“I will: but listen. What I have to ask is this. I want you to spend some weeks here as my guest (I do not care about expense). I want you to watch the changes in poor Lucia's illness. Save her—spare her to me, if you can. Restore her senses, if only for one short half hour, that she may know that I was faithful, that I adored her to the last, my beautiful innocent love.”

Dr. Carvell was much moved, but he merely said, "I will try what I can do."

"The past, the irremediable past!"

"Do not dwell upon it, my dear young friend, if you will allow me to call you so. Try to keep yourself as quiet as possible, for the Countess's sake as well as for your own. Everything shall be arranged according to your wishes. I will see Lady Oxenten before I leave, and come to you this evening."

Thus a new inmate was added to the Villa.





CHAPTER XI.

LUCIA.



AS soon as he could stand without assistance, Lord Oxenten insisted on being allowed to see his unfortunate wife. An affectionate Italian peasant who had lived with Lucia ever since her marriage, attended as nurse, but he hurried her away. There must be no witness of his heart's great agony.

The hour of frenzy had passed, and the poor maniac was apparently calm and gentle. She sat rocking herself backwards and forwards in a chair murmuring in soft, low tones, as if hushing some invisible

slumberer. A piteous sight—an angel's beauty, with no mind, no soul!

Scarcely able to control his feelings, Lord Oxenten threw himself on a couch near her. His newly acquired strength was failing him.

“Lucia, my Lucia! God help me,” he ejaculated, bitterly; “it is I who have brought her to this.”

Lucia did not seem to hear. She went on singing to herself, while ever and anon, like a buoy slipped from its holdings tossed hither and thither on the wildest waves of ocean, his own name smote the ear of the listener. “Arthur, Arthur,” but no sense, no coherency of meaning.

“Oh, Lucia,” he exclaimed, in a burst of passionate fondness, rising and throwing his arm round her. “Speak to me, darling. Cannot you recollect me? Don't you remember Arthur?”

At the sound of that beloved name imprinted even on the stony blank of delirium, she looked round irresolutely.

“Arthur! who speaks of Arthur? Arthur is dead.”

His lips sought hers, tremblingly, passionately. Those fond warm kisses, would they not convince her?

For one moment Lucia suffered the caress, then roughly started from his grasp. Her strength was greater than his, and he had not power to detain her.

“No, no. You must not do that. No one must ever do that now.”

She stood erect, defiant: her magnificent black eyes gazing at him with the wild glare of insanity.

Lord Oxenten was not prepared for the suddenness of her movements. In trying to soothe her, he lost his balance, and his temple struck with violence against the edge

of a marble table. He fell, partially stunned, bleeding and motionless: and Dr. Carvell (who, dreading the result of the interview, had been waiting anxiously without), alarmed by the noise of the fall, rushed into the room.

What a spectacle arrested his attention!

A new mood had come over Lucia. She looked changed and saddened, as if struck by a remorseful pity. Sitting on the floor, supporting the Earl's head upon her shoulder, breathing soft kisses over the wound, which left a sanguine stain on her lips, few would have imagined her insane.

When Dr. Carvell entered, his first thought was that of separation; but a moment's reflection convinced him it would be unwise, perhaps dangerous, to attempt it.

Lucia appeared to catch some impression of the kind, for she twined her arms closely

round her husband's neck, and turning her glance full on the intruder, exclaimed, angrily—

“Arthur is dead. You shall not take him away.”

It was a touching scene. Physical strength and beauty had gradually returned in proportion as the mind grew weaker. Her raven hair, which in her half recumbent position swept the ground, floated round her in luxuriant disorder. Ever since her illness she had resisted every attempt to put it up, though she submitted to have it brushed with tolerable patience. To any entreaty on the subject, her reply was, “Arthur told me he liked to see it down.” For a similar reason she insisted on being always dressed in white.

When Lord Oxenten regained his consciousness, and felt Lucia's kisses on his forehead, a wild hope of her recovery thrilled

every nerve. He would not stir lest it should prove to be a dream—a dream so infinitely sweet, that to go back to the reality would be almost worse to him than death.

“ Lucia, my own, my wife ! ”

“ Are you alive now, Arthur ? Ah, I forget, you will go away again and leave me.”

And the old look of weariness and pain came into her face.

“ Never, Lucia, never ! Let me rise, my darling.”

To Dr. Carvell's surprise and delight she got up quietly, and then stood leaning her head lovingly against her husband's shoulder.

“ You love me, Arthur ? ”

“ More than my life.”

That night he would not leave her. Even the physician thought it advisable for

him to remain, and so preparations were immediately made for the Earl and Countess to occupy the same suite of apartments, the nurse being within call, and Dr. Carvell himself sleeping in an adjoining room.

Day after day passed on, till weeks lost themselves in months.

Poor Lucia! Unconsciously soothed by a beloved presence, it seemed as if her senses were partially restored, though everything connected with the past was an absolute blank. But the long-suffering spirit had worn away its tenement, and with the first faint glimmerings of intellect her health perceptibly declined.

Dr. Carvell noticed this with many sad misgivings. The Earl did not or would not see it, and no one had courage to suggest to him that all was not going on hopefully and well. Yet he might have traced an undefined warning in the colour-

less lip and faded cheek, the drooping form of his cherished wife, nestling for hours in his arms, now strong enough to bear her weight—alas, how easily borne !

The good physician's heart smote him as he watched the almost agonizing tenderness with which the young nobleman hung over the couch of his fragile treasure.

Was returning reason to usher in the advent of the dark-browed king of terrors ? Surely passing away : slowly withering like the flower that is crushed by the heel of the passer-by ! Strangers might look on in wonder and pity, but his eyes were holden that he could not see.

Alas ! for the love of earth.





CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE COINCIDENCE.

ON the fourth of June at a quarter to eight P.M., Sir Frederick Morton rode slowly homewards.

A glorious sunset shed a thousand charms over hill and dale and grove, tinging earth and heaven with gold, and surrounding the beautiful old Grange with a picturesque halo. Tempted by the loveliness of the evening, he dismounted opposite the church, and consigning his tired horse to the care of a shepherd, with orders to lead him gently to the stables, determined to walk the remainder of the way.

Across the fields bearing off to the left,

a narrow footpath led in a direct line from the village to the Lower Farm, tenanted by Thomas Brooks. A quarter of a mile further on, and nearly a mile from the Grange, was a grove of trees, whose dense foliage almost excluded the daylight that still lingered on their summits. Before entering the deep shade, Sir Frederick turned round to gaze upon the landscape. As he did so, his glance suddenly rested on two figures, a man and a girl, partly concealed by a shrubbery belonging to the farm. He could see that the man wore a dark suit with a round hat slouched over the eyes. The girl's hands were folded and her face was partially averted, but he was too far off to recognise the features of either. Presently they separated, and the hat disappeared behind a fir plantation which adjoined the shrubbery. Through this plantation a cart-road led by a circuitous route

to the Grange. Sir Frederick's curiosity was unpleasantly excited. There was nothing extraordinary in a rustic love affair ; but the stranger was undoubtedly a gentleman, and that girl creeping stealthily round by the back-door, with an evident anxiety to get in unseen, bore a strong resemblance to his favourite Minnie.

A feeling of salutary anger dispelled for a time the look of gloom and weariness which had gathered on his countenance. He was disappointed and displeased that Minnie, the guileless innocent Minnie, should be induced to listen to the insidious love-making of a man above her in position. He fancied he had an inkling of this mysterious individual, but it might be rather difficult to ascertain the truth.

When he reached the Grange, Sir Desborough was out. The coincidence was singular.



CHAPTER XIII.

MINNIE BROOKS.



HE gorgeous sunset is followed by a resplendent morning: bright and soft, fresh and sweet as an English summer morning should be.

In the cheerful parlour of the Lower Farm, the farmer's granddaughter is engaged in her usual household avocations. She is polishing the furniture, and singing in a low clear voice like a forest bird. Those dainty fingers, of which no lady need to be ashamed, are used to work, and hard work too. Not all day perhaps, for Minnie is industrious, and has generally finished by

the evening. Then, while her grandfather sleeps in the old arm-chair, a relic of by-gone days, in which it is his somewhat curious boast that his great-grandfather slept before him, she steals out into the little garden at the back of the house, or wanders up and down the adjoining grove, gathering wild flowers or reading to herself. Having been accustomed to do this from childhood—ever since her mother's death left her doubly orphaned—she is allowed to do it now, unquestioned.

Rarely lovely in her sweet, rustic simplicity. The soft rounded arms, with sleeves tucked up above the elbow; the trim short gown of dark blue serge, yet made with some regard to taste, and thoroughly becoming to the wearer, displaying to advantage a well-formed foot and ankle, clad in the cleanest of white hose; the large, inquiring, brown eyes that flash upon you with a

strange mixture of frankness and modesty ; and the thick masses of chestnut hair, rolled round and round in a kind of double coronet, from which one tiny curl falls over the pure white neck. Where all is in such perfect harmony, one cannot well imagine any change for the better. No attempt at undue finery ; no mimicry of those beyond her station. Is this the girl to be led astray by a few honeyed and deceitful words ?

Presently Minnie pauses, and starts ; then, laying aside her work, looks shyly through the casement, which, opening at the side, fills the room with a perfume of jessamine and roses. Two men are walking slowly down the village foot-path, the taller of whom lingers behind as he passes the swing-gate leading to the farm. Minnie knows that face and form too well. Her colour rises, and the cherry lips part in a

smile of expectancy. The white hand, on which glitters a plain seal ring, incessantly playing with the dark moustache — she cannot be mistaken—that hand has held her own erewhile. But will he not look round? Ah yes; he raises his hat, and the young heart throbs wildly with childish but dangerous triumph. It is so nice to be treated like a lady!

“Look here, Lawrence,” says Sir Desborough, lazily leaning on the gate, “did you ever see a prettier little nest than this is?”

“It is pretty, certainly.”

John Lawrence is too much occupied with his own thoughts to wonder what makes the gay Baronet loiter as he has done for the last ten minutes.

They stand there nearly a quarter of an hour talking on indifferent subjects, but Sir Desborough does not raise his eyes

again until they leave. It is no part of his plan to be seen watching Minnie, although he may wish to give her the opportunity of looking at him.

Directly they are out of sight Minnie returns to her previous occupation, but her light-heartedness is gone. The rest of the day she wanders about the house like one in a dream. Will he speak to her that evening? He knows her favourite haunts, for the first time she saw him he asked her whether she was fond of walking in the woods. And Minnie, foolish little Minnie, told him that it was her one great pleasure. Of course they only met by chance, but those chance meetings have occurred very frequently of late; and last night he called her "darling," and whispered that he "cared for her." No wonder she is absent and forgetful; no wonder the intervening space seems long, and that she

starts on her ordinary ramble with an undefined dread that perhaps she may not meet him.

It will be remembered that Sir Frederick had arranged to attend a parish meeting on that day. In the afternoon he took Mrs. Lawrence for a drive, and on his return a consultation with his steward detained him until dinner. Immediately after dinner Sir Desborough decamped. Five minutes later, determined not to be foiled, Morton left the room on the plea of headache, which a walk might remove, resolving to choose that particular time for his visit to the farm. The rites of hospitality were held too sacred at Donnington to admit a thought of quarrelling with the supposed offender: but, if occasion offered, he might quietly remonstrate, talk to Minnie herself, and caution her grandfather to watch over her more carefully.

If Minnie Brooks is, as he believes her, thoroughly pure-minded, she will most assuredly be warned. A woman's safest shield is her own virtue. And yet, when he thinks over the incident of the preceding evening with all its probable contingencies, he does not feel quite satisfied. Probably few would in the case of a beautiful unsophisticated girl of seventeen, and a man nearly double her age, with all the advantages of rank combined with great personal attractions. Even if she repulse him with well-merited indignation, his dangerous love-making may disturb her peace for many a long day.

Having reached the confines of the Park, in a fit of abstraction he takes the wrong turning, and soon becomes involved in a part of the forest surnamed "the maze," on account of its numerous and intricate paths. Majestic trees, the growth of centuries, sur-

rounded by multitudes of lesser date, from five to fifteen feet in height, extend some miles on either side. The sun in its meridian splendour can hardly penetrate that dark, deep coolness, or do more than cast a brighter hue on the thousand varieties of green. There is an outlet if he could only find it, which would lead him directly to the farm without taking the trouble to go back. Yonder it lies bordered by a multitude of wild flowers. He has not advanced many steps before he hears a low hum of voices apparently proceeding from a path alongside the one he is pursuing. Another half-dozen paces bring him to the level of the speakers. He can now hear, without, however, being able to see, or being seen by either. It is unnecessary, for he instantly recognises both.

“You love me, Minnie?”

A sweet childish voice murmurs some-

thing inaudible, ending, however, with the question—

“But why may I not tell my grandfather?”

Sir Frederick grows hot and cold alternately. Were he at that moment face to face with the delinquent, the rules of society might prove insufficient to restrain his anger.

Not quite liking to play the eaves-dropper, he endeavours to force a passage through the wood, but the branches are too thick and closely set. At last he recollects seeing a path as he came which may possibly lead into the other. Retracing his steps, a few short turnings bring him to a point whence he can obtain a view of Minnie and Sir Desborough, without their being aware of his vicinity. The latter, in the identical round hat and dark evening dress, is leaning against a tree.

Spell-bound by a kind of fascination, Morton stands rooted to the spot ; Minnie's dubious and agitated manner grieves and perplexes him.

Sir Desborough does not attempt much demonstration ; he is too practised in the wiles of betrayal.

Presently, slowly and cautiously, he lays his hand upon her arm. She does not remove it.

“Heavens, will she yield?”

Morton's suppressed irritation savours something of disappointed trust.

The one hand lies there quietly ; the other is folded in the breast of its owner ; and Minnie, the still innocent Minnie, neither stirs nor speaks. He can bear it no longer. Instinctively taking two strides forward, another bound will place him at her side. He can hear now.

He can hear, and what ?

The cooing of the ringdove overhead, soft and gentle, pleading reciprocated tenderness.

The old tale of love, so called—unholy passion, unpunishable wrong, deep-masked in protestation of affection.

Does she not see? Will she not understand?

Not immediately. The tempter's words are crafty and well-chosen. Who dreams of a pitfall covered over with flowers? And yet, strange magnetism of idea made manifest in touch, the imperceptible pressure of that quiet hand sends a thrill like liquid fire through heart and brain. Neck, face, and arms flush rosy red; her breath comes quick and short; a gilded glittering sin rises up bodily before her, and beckons her to its embraces. She begins to understand it now.

Not all at once, slowly and painfully, as

one might wake to the probe of agony dealt by a beloved hand, searching deep, deep down till it has grasped the innermost fibres of our being ; and when the quivering life lies disrobed, defenceless, and trembling, acknowledging the reality of power, but self-deluded to the last : “ It cannot be meant, it is only to try us.” Then wrenching all away.

Even so.

Her large eyes fix themselves upon his countenance with a look ; such a look ! and with a cry exceeding sharp and bitter, like the wail of the spirit that is driven from its Eden, she snatches away her arm, and flies from him, despoiled not of that which is the dearest heritage of woman, but of the child-like trust and confidence, the guileless innocence of evil, the unsuspecting, unsuspicious judging of others by herself, that has passed away for ever, and will not be recalled.

On, on, in mad wild haste, to be quit of his presence, out of hearing of his terrible words. One moment's energy and strength. In vain : she trembles and turns faint ; her foot slips and she falls. Sir Desborough follows with a smile of amused security. But another is before him, another arm is round the terrified girl, and a voice hoarse with indignation tells plainly of undesirable witness.

“Minnie, my child, come home with me.”

Now, this was about the last contingency on which Sir Desborough had reckoned. To take any farther steps in the matter while he continued Sir Frederick's guest, would be, he felt, impracticable, if indeed he had not already made the Grange too hot to hold him. As he walked back alone he came to the conclusion that, all things considered, it would be more prudent, under

the plea of business, to take his departure on the morrow, correctly surmising that, rather than allow anything unpleasant to transpire, Sir Frederick would accept his congé, and keep the reason of it to himself. Chance favoured him. Several letters, affording a plausible excuse to Lady Morton for his abrupt resolve, arrived by the morning's post. He must be in town that day : he was extremely sorry, and so forth ; but unfortunately there was no help for it.

With the exception of Sir Frederick, who maintained an ominous silence, all warmly expressed their disappointment. Sir Desborough was a man of polished manners, and a most entertaining companion. In a retired country residence, amusing qualifications are in great request, and the ladies of the household who had no opportunity of judging otherwise than favourably,

would naturally regret the loss of his society.

He was too good a tactician to say anything to Sir Frederick at the close of that eventful evening; but meeting him alone next day, a shadow of vexation at his evident estrangement, or perhaps some touch of instinctive courtesy, brought out the remark—

“Morton, if I had had the least idea that in talking soft nonsense to that pretty little country girl I was trespassing on your preserves, nothing would have induced me to offer you annoyance. Believe me, I am heartily sorry.”

Sir Frederick bit his lip. The apology was almost worse than the offence.

“Say no more about it, Denton. When do you start?”



CHAPTER XIV.

THE POST BRINGS UNWELCOME TIDINGS.



WE must pass over the intervening months to the following September.

Through Lord Oxenten's influence, John Lawrence had recently been appointed to the Vicarage of F——.

The Dowager Lady Glendon and her daughters, Marion Hayes, Captain Lenham, and Molyneux Temple, were again on a visit at the Grange.

It was the day after their arrival, and the three gentlemen had been out shooting. On their return, after a hasty toilette, Sir Frederick inquired for his sister. She had

not been seen since luncheon, and Lady Morton appeared both hurt and angry at her prolonged absence from the family circle.

The preceding three months had brought with them no visible improvement to Mary Morton's health. Perhaps rather the reverse, for whenever there existed no absolute necessity for assumed cheerfulness, the ravages of sorrow and anxiety might be easily traced in the pale cheek and sad expression.

On this particular evening she stood leaning against the broad old-fashioned window-ledge, in the quietude of her own room, gazing pensively into the far distance over the forest-clad lands of her idolized brother. Outwardly calm—and yet what words were those which fell with such harrowing distinctness on one listening ear?

“To die—to be at rest!”

After knocking several times without getting a reply, Sir Frederick entered unperceived.

“Oh, May! Is my love nothing?”

“How you startled me! Fred, dear Fred, do not look so pained. We all feel sad sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” repeated the Baronet, looking fondly into the altered, though still beautiful face. “Sometimes, yes; but with certain wilful individuals it is every day earnest May, you are making yourself seriously ill. What do you think I should do without my sister—my tiresome, naughty little sister?”

He spoke lightly, as men are wont to speak to cover intense feeling.

“Fred, dearest, I am so sorry. Come, kiss me, and pray don’t be grave, or I shall fancy you are angry.”

“Never angry with you, May.”

“Mamma is, though. I quite dread going down when you are absent.”

Sir Frederick sighed. There was something in all this which he did not understand; but, as we rarely ask questions (save in anger) of those we love, if we imagine their confidence withheld, he made no farther comment.

The next morning the Donnington party and their guests were all assembled at breakfast, when the post-bag was brought in. There was a rush of excitement, followed by a sudden lull of conversation, which last, however, was presently broken by an impatient exclamation from Captain Lenham.

“What is the matter?” asked Sir Frederick.

“He has scalded his fingers with the teapurn,” replied Molyneux Temple, coolly,

without looking up from the long foreign letter he was reading.

"I am very sorry," began Mary, who presided at that end of the table.

"It is nothing, thank you. How absurd you are, Temple! Well, Morton, I have got a step at last."

"Which seems to have put you rather out of temper. I congratulate you."

"Ay, but it curtails my leave," growled the Captain, in a tone of savage drollery, at which everybody laughed.

The momentary amusement was succeeded by a general expression of regret that he should be compelled to shorten his visit.

After a pause Sir Frederick resumed—

"When do you join?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"My dear Florence," said Lady Glendon, "if you have finished your breakfast I wish

you would take these notes and answer them at once. My kind compliments and thanks, but we shall not be in town for a week or ten days. You know what to say."

After some conversation between Sir Frederick and the ladies, Molyneux Temple folded up his letter, and having taken a sip of chocolate with the air of a connoisseur, quietly observed—

"I rather think my news will astonish you all. Morton, a great friend of yours has been married more than a year; and, so far as English society is concerned, no one but himself the wiser until now. Son and heir to boot."

"Who? What, Oxenten? Never!"

"True, though: there can be no mistake about it. Carvell has been staying with his brother, who is a doctor residing on the spot. The Countess is said to be an ex-

ceedingly pretty woman; the worst of it is——”

The remaining part of the sentence was lost, for saying something indistinctly about speaking to Florence, Mary Morton rose to leave the room. As Lenham opened the door, her extreme paleness struck him with a kind of terror. There was no time for reflection; the next moment he was standing in the hall. Mary had fallen in a dead faint, half supported by the baluster to which she still unconsciously clung. To raise her in his arms, carry her upstairs to Lady Glendon's boudoir, and call for Florence's assistance, was the work of a few seconds.

“My poor May! Captain Lenham, what is the matter?”

She might well ask. Lenham was almost as pale as his inanimate charge.

“May I come in?”

“Yes ; no, carry her to her own room ; this way ; quick !”

Florence’s ready tact divined that it was not a matter for idle comment. Fortunately, no one was about in that part of the house.

Having gently placed Mary on a couch, while Florence busied herself in applying the usual restoratives, Lenham hastily withdrew.

When Mary regained consciousness, she looked round with a bewildered gaze.

“Where am I ? What has happened ?”

“Nothing, dear, only I suppose the heat overcame you, and you fainted on the stairs.”

“Ah !” She shivered, and turned away.

With discretion beyond her years, Florence went on bathing her friend’s temples with eau-de-Cologne, silencing a curiosity that she could not help feeling.

Presently Mary spoke again.

“If you would not mind, dear Florie, not saying anything to my mother; she is so easily frightened. If any one asks for me, say I am gone to lie down. I shall do very well now. Thank you very much for taking care of me. I need not keep you longer.”

“But, are you sure you feel equal to being left alone?”

“Quite equal, dear, thank you. I am not in the least ill. Pray don’t say anything to Frederick, nor indeed to any one. You will not refuse to oblige me in this?”

“Certainly not, dear May.”

But Florence Glendon looked a little disappointed, and probably felt hurt. Mary was evidently unhappy and determined not to acknowledge it.

“Poor Florie, I am so sorry to have frightened you.”

“It is not that—but——”

“But what, darling? How mysterious you are!”

“I don’t want to tease you, May, but if you are ever in any trouble, I wish you would let me help you.”

“You dear child,” said Mary, kissing her affectionately. “Of course you shall help me, that is, if I am ever crushed under a mountain that these little fingers can move. I often wish you lived at Donnington, Florie, so that we could see each other every day, and all the year round. How long do you suppose Lady Glendon will let you stay?”

“Only till to-morrow fortnight, if indeed till then.”

“So short a time! Captain Lenham and Mr. Temple both leave earlier. When you are all gone there will be only Marion. Did I tell you she is here for a month?”

"I heard Lady Morton say so yesterday. How I envy her the privilege!"

"Never mind, darling, we shall meet again at Christmas, perhaps before. Marion has no mother. Lady Glendon does not like you to visit without her. It is that which makes it so difficult to arrange. But you will be missed. Do run away! I will not allow you to stay another minute."

Captain Lenham did not return to the breakfast-room. Believing his friends were too preoccupied to notice his absence, he put on his hat, and proceeded to the filbert walk, where, half an hour later, Temple found him pacing restlessly up and down with a harassed, anxious expression on his countenance, most unlike his usually sunny aspect.

"Thank heaven, you are come!"

"Come! of course I came to look for you, though I don't see why you should thank

heaven for the fact of my arrival. Whatever made you run away and hide in this extraordinary manner? Harry, old fellow, you seem confoundedly in the blues. What's up?"

"Why, that letter——"

"What, from the Horse Guards? You don't mean to say the loss of a week's holiday has cut you up like that?"

"Pshaw! I was referring to your news, not mine."

"What, about Oxenten's marriage? My dear fellow, how can it possibly concern you? You were never in love with the Countess, were you? Am I expected to tender you my sympathy?"

"Don't chaff, Temple. The matter is too serious. Did you see Miss Morton?"

The two friends exchanged glances.

"Phew! Sits the wind in that quarter?"

“I suspected the truth, and could not help watching her. Her sudden paleness alarmed me, and when she rose to leave the room, I followed. It was fortunate I did. She fainted on the stairs.”

“Poor girl!”

“I am afraid Lord Oxenten must be very much to blame. When he was staying here last autumn they were almost always together. As far as one could judge, he seemed to prefer her society to that of any one, and I am greatly mistaken if Morton did not think so too.”

“And all the while he was married? Too bad!”

“Strange as it may sound, I believe the fact of his marriage is the only palliation of his conduct.”

“How do you make that out?”

“Why, Oxenten is singularly free from vanity, and feeling secure himself, would

never dream of danger to her. A vain man would have been more alive to the probable results of such close intimacy. Oxenten's error is not the less to be deplored; but he must have erred from thoughtlessness rather than premeditated wrong."

"Well, it is awfully unlucky. I wish Carvell had not told me, or that I had been wise enough to keep the news to myself. Miss Morton looks anything but strong, and if this makes her ill, I shall be tempted to reproach myself as the indirect cause."

"I do not think you need do that. It must have transpired one way or another. Poor Morton, I hope his impressions are not the same as mine; he perfectly adores his sister; the idea of her suffering would drive him frantic, especially as he would not unnaturally blame himself for having thrown Oxenten so much in her society."

They stood talking some time longer, when Sir Frederick's voice was heard calling through the trees.

"Lenham! Temple! where are you? I have been hunting for you everywhere. All the carriages are gone: I shall have to drive you in the dog-cart."

A picnic had been arranged for twelve o'clock that day. Lenham took out his watch—it was nearly one.

"Where is Miss Morton?" asked Temple, drawing on his glove.

"Gone with Lady Glendon."





CHAPTER XV.

NOT MUCH TO TELL.

IR FREDERICK was deeply wounded by all that he had heard that morning. As Lenham suggested, he had long imagined the possibility of an attachment between his sister and his friend, and not unnaturally was inclined to regard the latter as the destroyer of that sister's happiness. His ready friendship found ample excuse for the young Earl's silence during his father's lifetime, but when the days of mourning were ended, he somewhat prematurely allowed himself to expect proposals in due form. In his first surprise at the

intimation of Lord Oxenten's marriage, he lost the opportunity of interrogating Mary's countenance, though her abrupt departure from the breakfast-table did not escape unnoticed. And yet when he saw her start for the picnic, with more than wonted animation of voice and manner, with a rich colour on her cheek and a brilliant light in her large dark eyes, his penetration seemed to be at fault. After all, he might be mistaken, and a gush of pity mingled strangely with his indignation against the supposed offender, as he recollected the close of Temple's startling announcement. "The worst of it is, the poor lady has not been right in her mind since the birth of her son, and the Earl is almost beside himself with grief."

Such was the *prima facie* explanation given by Dr. Carvell to his family.

Sir Frederick was unusually silent during

the whole of a two hours' drive, and could scarcely rouse himself sufficiently to take a part in the general entertainment. A storm was passing over the mind of more than one in that festive assembly. Yet it would be difficult to imagine a happier scene than that which presented itself to the view of the new-comers, as emerging from a winding road between high banks and hedgerows, they came in sight of their expecting friends. Most of the county rank and fashion had received invitations, and were scattered round in groups, to all appearance in a state of thorough enjoyment; while at a little distance below, a number of servants were engaged in making preparations for an early dinner, beneath an open tent which had been erected for the purpose.

The spot is picturesque and well chosen. A sheltered glade between two miniature woods on the side of a hill, with a tolerably

smooth landing-place of turf, overlooks some miles of a cultivated valley. Close by a pretty village runs a small silvery river, which at the finest point of view sweeping beneath a single arch, suddenly widens to a broad expanse, divided far to the west by a bold projecting tongue of black rock; the right arm forming a glorious water-fall, the pride and chief attraction of the neighbourhood: the left, tumbling and roaring in vain rivalry, a few yards farther down contracts, and plunges into a hollow between two dark, scooped-out walls of earth, where its violence self-exhausted, degenerates into an insignificant stream. Two swans are lightly skimming the surface of the smooth sheet of water, lifting their ruffled plumage to the sun. There is a church facing the spectators, and the rectory grounds slope down to the edge of the river, where, leaning against a tree, with eyes bent on

his float, a juvenile angler, probably the rector's son, waits anxiously for the long-expected bite.

Attired with exquisite taste, her rich hair falling heavily below the large sun-hat that shades, but does not hide the syren loveliness of the wearer, Marion Hayes, separated from the rest of her party, is surrounded by gentlemen. But she is not thinking of them. Her eyes wander restlessly to the green winding line of hedge-row, whence the sound of wheels and the measured "horse's tramp" are becoming gradually more distinct. "Ha! they are in sight now." She rises: the gentlemen rise too, though some of them may not be exactly well-pleased at this sudden manifestation of interest on the part of the beautiful heiress.

Sir Frederick delays a moment to give some order to his servant, and it so happens

that Marion Hayes is the first to greet his arrival.

“ Oh, Sir Frederick, I am so glad you are come. We have been quite lost without you.”

Is she acting, or is it genuine delight that beams in the liquid lustrous eyes?

Sir Frederick was taken by surprise. He looked pleased, and certainly felt flattered. No man is insensible to the implied preference of a young and lovely woman. Granting this, it was but natural that he should be drawn into paying her more than customary attention.

After dinner the company dispersed. Most of the chaperones became speedily tired with the heat, and while they sat down to rest in the shade, the juniors were left to themselves. Far removed from intrusion, Sir Frederick might have been seen walking along an unfrequented path,

his proud head bent, and his whole manner denoting much inward perturbation. When he had reached the confines of the wood, he turned back, and repeated this several times :—

“ The last time he was not alone.”

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The hours pass rapidly.

Crossing the range of hills beyond which lies the London Road, is a boy apparently not more than thirteen years of age. Though shoeless and travel-stained, he can hardly be considered to belong to the ordinary class of beggars. There is something too frank and independent in his walk, something too honest in the speaking eye and sunburnt, attenuated face; and yet he has had to beg his way for many a long mile. Sleeping at night under a hedge-row or a haystack: quenching his thirst in primitive fashion at the river-brink or road-

side spring; rarely getting more than a solitary meal, and often going thirty hours without food: he toils on contentedly and even cheerfully. The end of his journey is before him, and hope is strong in the boyish heart, gushing out from time to time in fragments of a rude song or an animated whistle. Born in a different sphere, cultivated and cared for in mind and body, he might be reckoned by many a singularly handsome child; but want and poverty have left their traces, and no beauty can long withstand the pressure of starvation.

Skirting the little wood on the left, he just misses Lady Glendon and her party; then slowly descending the hill, looks shyly and hungrily at the open tent and group of merry-hearted servants devouring the remainder of the feast.

Sir Frederick's coachman, a bluff, portly individual of sixty-five, born and bred on

the Donnington estates, sees the new-comer, and calls out cheerily—

“Hallos, my little man, you seem hungry. Here, we’ve enough and to spare, there’s no good carryin’ it home.”

And he throws the half-famished boy some broken bread and three-fourths of a chicken.

“There, sit ye down, and eat away to yer heart’s content. Jim, give the little lad a glass o’ beer.”

No second invitation was required. When the cravings of hunger were appeased, one of the party asked him for his history.

“I ain’t got much to tell,” said the boy, sadly, a sudden gloom overshadowing his sunshiny face, sunshiny still, notwithstanding the visible ravages of hunger and premature care. “I ain’t got much to tell. Mother died a long time ago.”

“Well, and your father?”

“I never seed un. Old Granny White as lived in our alley kept me to run o’ errands. When she died I wer nearly ten, and wanted to go out to sarvice; but they wonna ha’ a boy without a ch’racter in Lunnon, so I took to sweepin’ crossin’s.”

“And what made ye leave the crossin’s, my man?” asked the coachman, kindly, signing to his companions not to laugh at the poor boy’s story.

“A leddy said, maybe I’d get work aisy in the country, so I’s e agoin’ down to try. She wer allors kind to me, she wer.”

The conversation was interrupted by a shrill whistle from the under-groom. Two of the horses had broken loose from their temporary stable, and were wildly careering over the hill. Forgetful of everything but the momentary fun, all but the butler set off in pursuit. The excited animals had apparently no intention of being speedily

coerced into submission. Driven back on all sides they at length made direct for the wood, creating no small alarm among the ladies, and affording the greatest possible amusement to the gentlemen, most of whom heartily joined in the chase.

The wandering boy stood silently watching for awhile, then turning to the butler, inquired—

“Can you tell me, sir, the nearest way to ——?”

“Oh, my lad, you shouldn’t have come down here, though for the matter of that, poor child, I am glad enough you did; you won’t be quite so hungry this afternoon. Stay, take something with you.” And he packed a quantity of provision in the coarse bundle which the boy carried on a stick slung across his shoulder. “You must go back by those trees, yonder, d’ye see? till you get into the beaten road: they

will direct you again at the turnpike-gate."

"Thank you, sir, thank you kindly."

He trudged on merrily, climbing a rough pathway that ran alongside a fir plantation adjoining the wood. The sound of voices caused him to look up. A lady and gentleman were sitting on the bank above, talking in a low earnest tone.

The boy started. A flash of sudden recognition lighted up his countenance. Involuntarily he touched his cap, and hesitated, as if about to speak.

The Baronet (it was Sir Frederick himself), probably anticipating an appeal to his charity, threw him a sixpence, and then turned to resume his conversation with Marion Hayes.

Forgotten? Of course the great gentleman could not be expected to remember him!

Picking up the bright silver coin, the little lad went on. Another opportunity of unravelling a tangled web had passed away for ever. But who knew anything about it, and what possible connexion could there be between those two?

Ah, Sir Frederick, the past is asleep for the moment. By-and-by it will rouse itself to vengeance.





CHAPTER XVI.

BEHIND THE SCENES.



IN another fortnight Marion Hayes was engaged to Sir Frederick Morton.

How it came to pass nobody knew. They had been riding together, and something more than his usual courtesy might be observed in Sir Frederick's manner as he assisted her to dismount; a grave and tender sympathy rather than the ardour of a happy accepted lover. What did it mean?

Marion's countenance was flushed and tearful. She clung to him for a moment, and then hurried to her room. Sir

Frederick stood leaning against the balustrade watching her. She had taken off her hat as they came in, and her lovely hair unbound fell over her riding-habit in superb disorder.

His own! Whence that sigh?

A fairy footstep crossed the hall.

“Dreaming, Frederick?”

“My dear little sister!” He put his arm round her; then after a moment’s hesitation, “I may as well tell you now. You must congratulate me, May.”

“What! Can it be true?” She looked at him with a searching tenderness.

“Quite true, May. I am engaged—engaged to Marion Hayes.”

He repeated it quietly, sententiously, as if giving utterance to a fact that, once admitted, could never be disclaimed.

“My darling brother, I am so glad, so very glad. It is everything to me to know

that you are happy. And you will be ; you must be !”

Happy ! Was it a whisper of mockery from the past that thrilled so painfully ? Morton seemed to be fatigued, and his lips were forcibly compressed. It was but for a moment. When he spoke again his voice was calm and clear, and the shadow of constraint passed over unobserved.

“I hope so, I trust so, God willing.” And with a brotherly kiss he went on to bear the glad tidings to his mother.

Mary lingered in the porch. It was a lovely evening. The autumn sun came down brightly and warmly on the still rich though fading garden glories : even the breeze that drifted a few scattered leaves to her feet was rather soft than cold. Where were her thoughts ? Perhaps far away in a distant land, on the banks of a deep blue river, where, though she knew it

not, sorrow and death, and love stronger than death, were striving for the mastery. No one could tell. Neither by word nor sign could the history be read: the few who had any opportunity of judging, pronounced her decidedly more cheerful; Sir Frederick alone might not be entirely satisfied, but he kept his suspicions to himself.

Let us now follow Marion to her room. Laying down her riding-whip she paused, and listened, evidently anxious to avoid interruption: then locked the door, and throwing herself on a couch began to think. Fearfully hard work sometimes. Men and women too grow old more inwardly than outwardly. The feelings, the affections, the fine and delicate machinery that constitutes the framework of existence, the keynote of a life-long harmony or discord, all these may be overstrained, worn down, and blunted in an hour. Paler and paler grew

that beautiful cheek ; but the eye was clear, and the lip almost haughty in repose. It was the calm before the storm.

Presently she rose, and unlocking a small portable writing-desk, took thence several packets of letters and a miniature. The letters were carefully tied, many of them of recent date. The likeness was that of—but we will not anticipate. Throwing the costly trinket on the ground, Marion made a movement as if about to trample it beneath the heel of her riding boot : then, by a varying impulse, raised it to her lips, and covered it with wild passionate kisses. A change had come over the proud spirit ; the flash of anger and contempt died out ; and hot blinding tears, such tears as are shed but seldom in a lifetime, fell thick and fast over the Galahad resemblance, and the letters that were finally unfastened and read.

At length they were all perused, and gradually burnt by the aid of a small taper, when a step was heard without.

“May I come in, dear?”

Hastily concealing the miniature in her bosom, Marion unlocked the door, and Mary Morton affectionately embraced and congratulated her brother's betrothed.

“Oh, Marion, you do not know how happy you have made us all; how delighted we are to think that Frederick will at last be married; I, more than any one, because he has given me a sister; but you look tired, dear,” she added, anxiously, glancing at her friend's pale cheeks and heavy eyelids.

Marion forced a smile.

“I did not feel very well when I came in, and have been lying down. I wanted to compose myself a little. It was so unexpected; so very, very sudden.”

Not true, but plausible. Under any circumstances she knew that he would never lower her in the esteem of his family.

“Yes, it took us all by surprise; but we are so glad, so very glad, dear Marion. Mamma would have come to you herself, only Frederick kept her until it was almost too late to dress for dinner.”

Kind, thoughtful! Conscience whispered loudly of self-reproach.

Mary went on playfully—

“Thanks to this witching beauty, the unconquerable is conquered at last,” and she smoothed down the long silky hair with a feeling of sisterly pride. “You are very lovely, Marion.”

“So lovely,” rejoined the bride-elect, with an attempted laugh, “that you are determined not to allow me any time for improvement. I see you are dressed already.”

Her hand was on the bell. Mary caught it, exclaiming, eagerly—

“Do not ring for Elise. Let me help you to-night.”

A most inopportune request. For many reasons Marion wished to be alone.

“Do not send me away, dear sister. I should so like to stay with you this evening.”

Thus urged, it was impossible to refuse, and Marion reluctantly unfastened her riding-habit. As she did so, the miniature, which for the moment had escaped her recollection, slipped out and fell on the carpet. Before Mary could assist her, she snatched it up, and immediately crossed the room to unlock her jewel-case. When she came back to the table it was gone. Mary Morton, not unnaturally imagining that it was a gift from her brother, would have been better pleased if Marion had shown it

to her; but she was too well bred to say anything about it.

They were to be married in six weeks. Sir Frederick did not approve of long engagements, and declared that space of time sufficient for all needful preparations.

Lady Morton, notwithstanding the success of her plans, was scarcely satisfied with the progress of events. There was something in her son's manner which she could not understand. Involuntarily her thoughts went back to the little green pocket-book and the lock of dark brown hair; while with the undefined nervousness which wards us off a disagreeable subject she forebore either comment or inquiry. Her guests left Donnington the day after the news was suffered to transpire, and Marion with them, ostensibly to see about her trousseau. Indeed, etiquette forbade her to remain comparatively alone under the same roof with

her betrothed, Lady Morton having arranged to spend a week at Glendon Hall. It came out accidentally that Sir Frederick wrote to Mr. Hayes to ask permission to address his daughter some days before he proposed to her himself. All was thus in due form, and according to the most approved precedent. As regarded the eligibility of the match, there was but one opinion. Lady Morton and Bernardin Hayes were overwhelmed with congratulations.

Whether Sir Frederick himself participated in the prevailing exuberance of satisfaction nobody knew, and apparently nobody would venture to inquire.

Yes, one.





CHAPTER XVII.

EX PARTE.

LENHAM was dining out that evening, the very evening of the engagement, when a gentleman on his right volunteered the remark—

“So I hear Morton is to be married at last!”

It was not addressed to him, but, after listening some time to the turn of conversation, his curiosity got the better of politeness.

“I beg your pardon, Hargraves. Is it Sir Frederick Morton, of Donnington, of whom you are speaking?”

“ Yes. Why ? ”

“ May I ask the lady’s name ? ”

“ Certainly. It is no secret, or, if so now, will not long remain one—Miss Marion Hayes, the belle of the season.”

“ Strange. I have not heard of it.”

“ You could hardly have done so yet, unless through some member of the family. I breakfasted with Mr. Hayes on Tuesday, and he then told me he had just received proposals. It is, as I said, no secret, although it may not have generally transpired.”

“ Why I thought that Miss Hayes——”
He stopped suddenly, conscious of indiscretion.

“ I guess to what you allude,” rejoined the first speaker, an officer in the 6th Carabineers. “ The report that she was engaged to Sir Desborough Denton, formerly of ‘ Ours.’ ”

Lenham started on hearing his own shadowy suspicion thus put in a tangible form.

“You do not mean to say that such an idea existed?”

“Did you never hear of it before? It was the general opinion among our set. There must have been some foundation for the rumour.”

Before Lenham could reply another officer, Major Lery, joined in—

“Never trust to report, Hargraves. I was completely dumbfounded at mess one evening last spring, to hear it boldly asserted by several of those then present, that I, even I, old as I am (he was not more than five or six-and-forty), was said to be engaged to the very lady in question! And yet there was never a shadow of truth in such a statement. Now, I maintain that few things injure a girl more than being reputed to have been engaged once, or more than once, when on each occasion the engagement has been broken off. For a succession of non-results

argues some imperfection in the one who is subject to them, or believed to be so, which is effectively the same. And if very idle, though perhaps equally innocent conversation was the cause of producing such a belief in one case, it is, I think, perfectly allowable to suppose that the same cause alone produced the same effect in another."

Major Lery spoke warmly. He was a gallant, high-minded Irishman, one of those who are ever ready to strike home in defence of the absent or the weak.

Lenham and Hargraves bowed good-humouredly. They did not care to interrupt, for Lery's conversation was always at a premium.

"I remember once half-quarrelling with a friend of mine, then quartered at Dover. I had written to him, asking his opinion of a young lady. Well, I wont mention her

name. She was the only one of the unmarried young ladies there to whom I never talked nothings."

"Oh, Major. What a satire!"

"On myself? Faith, it is true, then. So few girls now-a-days care to talk sense; that is, when they condescend to talk to you at all," he continued, humorously. "Well, in this letter, I spoke out rather too freely, though without giving my friend any clue. So far, good; but I unluckily chanced to mention, as my reason for not writing further particulars, the universal propensity for scandal. He retaliated by a most angry reply, concluding by an assurance that he was not in the least annoyed by my ill-advised remarks. Now, *qui s'excuse s'accuse*. Ergo, he must have been, for I never even insinuated that he would be. Now, if I had simply told him who the girl was, it might have had this result: that in ordinary conversation with

any of his acquaintances (who were, I fancy, nearly all amongst hers), someone might say —

“ ‘ Miss So-and-so is to be married on the 34th of Octember. She is rather lucky, for it is a much better match than if she had married that man in the 6th, though she and he did seem to get on pretty well together last year.’

“ ‘ Whom do you mean by that man in the 6th?’

“ ‘ Why, Major So-and-so, of course.’

“ ‘ No! Was there really anything going on there?’

“ ‘ Well, I don’t know, but if you had seen them together at—— and at——, I think, etc.’

“ ‘ Ah! Now you mention the matter, I remember I have some very good proof that he did admire her.’

“ ‘ Have you really? May I ask what it is?’

“ ‘That I cannot tell you ; but certainly nothing could be more genuine.’

“ And so both would naturally get confirmed in the idea that the parties whose movements they had been discussing, had during the previous winter carried on a greater or a less flirtation. Such chit-chat, however injurious in isolated cases, being amongst the recognised, perhaps necessary, occurrences of every-day life, I will jump at my conclusion, that a man cannot be too cautious in alluding to a lady, if his doing so could by any possibility cause her character to be misconstrued.”

“ May I ask one question, Major ?” mischievously interpolated Hargraves, when the amusement and applause excited by the animated *ex-parte* dialogue had in some degree subsided. “ Is the young lady engaged now ?”

“I believe so.” He turned away abruptly, tossing off a bumper of champagne.

There was a sudden lull, and then an elderly gentleman entertained the company by giving them the history of a celebrated divine who, among other eccentricities, having made up his mind not to marry, was incontinently assailed by so many pressing offers from young ladies, that the only method he could devise to put a stop to their amorous effusions was to announce to his congregation that the very next proposal which came to his hands should be publicly pasted on the church-door.

Major Lery did not join in the general laugh. His thoughts were apparently painfully engrossed. After an interval of silence, he addressed himself to Lenham.

“Are you personally acquainted with Sir Frederick Morton?”

“With Morton? Intimately, he is my greatest friend.”

“Then, perhaps, when opportunity offers, you will give me an introduction?”

“I shall be most happy to do so. Morton will be delighted to make your acquaintance. He still retains a strong predilection for the army. My father always tells him he is a good soldier spoilt.”

“I am fortunate in having some little knowledge of his bride that is to be. In fact, when I was a young man I used to visit at the house of her uncle Gerard, so that my recollections of the family are of no very recent date.”

“I was not aware that Miss Hayes had any near relations except her father.”

“Nor has she now. Gerard Hayes died more than twenty years ago, and his beautiful young wife followed him to the grave in less than twelve months.”

“How sad!”

“Ay, it was sad. I never heard the whole story. Notwithstanding the consequent increase of fortune, each death seemed to be a terrible shock to the brother. Soon afterwards he went abroad, and while there married and lost his wife. When he returned to England, he brought with him an infant heiress, now the betrothed of your friend.”

“Do you recollect her mother’s maiden name?”

“I am not sure. I fancy it was Desborough. At any rate Sir Desborough Denton is some sort of a connexion.”

“Is Miss Hayes supposed to resemble her mother?”

“You may well ask the question,” exclaimed Hargraves, who had again joined the conversation. “Whenever I see Bernardin Hayes in the company of his beautiful

daughter, I find it extremely difficult to believe in their relationship."

"I think not," replied the Major, without seeming to heed the interruption, though a strange instantly suppressed smile crossed his countenance. "I think not. Miss Hayes is exceptionally gifted in personal attractions. To the best of my recollection, Mrs. Hayes was said to be immensely rich, and only moderately good-looking."

"In fact, you mean to imply that, as a poor woman, she would have been considered remarkably plain. And this was the mother of la belle Marion? Credat Judæus!"





CHAPTER XVIII.

CAPTAIN LENHAM GOES DOWN TO DONNINGTON.

THE information obtained that evening did not tend to promote Lenham's good humour. Marion Hayes had never stood high in his esteem, and now he felt almost tempted to dislike her. Many little instances of by-play between her and Sir Desborough recurred to his mind with startling distinctness. Could she love Morton as a woman ought to love her husband? Impossible! Then why should she marry him? "Confound it!" he muttered between his teeth. "I must be at the bottom of this somehow." And so the next week he got leave for a

day, and went down to Donnington, determined to find out the truth. During the interval, Sir Frederick had written, but his letter was not by any means satisfactory. It did not say enough; it was not eager, sanguine, hopeful, not such as Lenham himself would have written when he had just attained a man's dearest happiness in this life. The wording was stiff and formal; there was no sentiment, no outpouring of lover-like expression. Harry Lenham felt in a rage. A proposal for himself, Lawrence, and Temple to be groomsmen did not tend to restore his equanimity. "I'll be hanged first!" was his inward ejaculation, as he unexpectedly presented himself at the Grange.

"Sir Frederick is out, sir," said the manservant; "but he will probably be home within the hour. Lady Morton is at Glendon Hall."

“Can I see Miss Morton?”

He was ushered into the drawing-room, where he found the fair invalid listlessly turning over the pages of a novel. At the sight of the new-comer Mary rose, and extended her hand with a smile of undisguised pleasure. Lenham was a universal favourite. Few could withstand the winning suavity of his voice and manner, and certainly none of those who were privileged to know him intimately.

“Captain Lenham! This is kind. How good of you to run down unannounced. Frederick is out, but he will not be very long. Do sit down. Eugene shall bring you some refreshment.”

“Thank you. No. I dined early. But I am anxious to see Morton at once. Can you tell me which way he is gone?”

“Down to the Lower Farm. Poor old Brooks is seriously ill, and Frederick goes

to see him nearly every day. Shall I send to tell him you are here?"

"Thank you very much. With your permission, I will walk across the Park. We shall probably meet half-way, and can discuss our business *en route*. But I am neglecting my devoir. Pray pardon my forgetfulness, and allow me to congratulate you on the prospective fulfilment of a long-cherished wish."

Mary hesitated.

"Yes. Mamma is very glad; we are all glad, but——"

There was a reserve then. Lenham looked the question that he would not put in words.

"The fact is, we—that is—I—I am afraid Frederick is not quite well—not quite himself. It may be merely the excitement."

She paused as though expecting a reply, but Lenham's eyes were fixed on the ground.

“He always laughs at my anxiety, says that he is all right, only there is so much to do and think of in making preparations. He is exerting himself to the utmost in order that it may be a season of rejoicing to every one on the estate. I cannot help wishing he would not work so hard. I scarcely ever see or speak to him alone. Captain Lenham, you will fancy I am jealous.”

“Not I,” rejoined Lenham, warmly. “And if you were, with a brother such as Morton, the feeling might be easily excused. He was certainly not looking well when I was staying here a few weeks back, but I trust there is nothing to render you uneasy.”

Lenham’s inward misgivings, partly perhaps arising from the old conviction of a something wanting, were assuredly not diminished by Mary’s unsought confidence. This restless activity, hiding away the

need of human sympathy, could only be a mask. Some secret unhappiness—of that he felt quite sure—was trying to robe itself in the happiness of others. Sir Frederick's nearest and dearest were obviously afraid to ask him any questions.

He would, though—he was not going to be deterred from the fulfilment of friendship's duty by a dread of being thought officious.





CHAPTER XIX.

A SHADOW ON THE THRESHOLD.

THE farmhouse tenanted by Thomas Brooks was a long low building, consisting of only two stories, surrounded on three sides by a garden which extended to the Donnington forest. A quaint-looking porch furnished with a couple of rustic benches, and covered with a variety of climbing plants, from the sturdy evergreen to the delicate jessamine, whence the fragile blossoms had long ago departed, seemed to invite the passer-by to enter and taste the hospitality of its venerable owner. The farmyard and most of the farm build-

ings being hidden by the trees there was nothing to detract from the picturesque and cottage-like appearance of the house itself. Far down the hill a flock of sheep were quietly grazing in a meadow, their scattered fleeces dotting the greensward, and gleaming strangely white in the rays of the setting sun, while beyond rose the cross-surmounted spire of the village church.

In a pretty little sitting-room facing the swing-gate which opened on the pathway that led from the Grange to the village, were two persons—Minnie and her grandfather. Minnie was greatly altered; her smile had lost its brightness, and her step its elasticity, and there was a sad expression about the mouth, an undefined look of constraint, as if it had something to hide, and was unaccustomed to concealment. Some might consider her more lovely than before. The shadow of womanhood had fallen on the child face,

softening and refining the whole, though it shut out a portion of the sunshine. There was a nameless pleading in the deep hazel eyes, which at the same time attracted sympathy, and conveyed itself from inquiry. She plied her needle as industriously as ever, but there was something languid and spiritless in the movement; and as every now and then she looked up, turning to the aged sufferer with an intensity of sorrowful affection, the long brown eyelashes were dewy with unshed tears.

The hand of death was drawing closer and closer to the old farmer. Day by day for many months past he had felt its presence darkening the windows of his earthly home, and pointing him to the outer courts of the unknown world. Now, as he lay asleep on a large old-fashioned sofa, so still that more than once the anxious watcher at his side started, and listened to catch the sound of

his suppressed breathing, it seemed to be very near indeed. Even Minnie began to realize her prospective trial, and a bitter sense of loneliness fell on the young girl's heart as the presentiment of a second orphanage slowly dawned upon her. "I must lose him too, my kind old grandfather," she murmured, self-reproachfully. "Would that I had never deceived him!"

Just then the swing-gate snapped; a step was heard without, and the next moment Sir Frederick came in. His favourite companion Ponto, a magnificent black retriever, followed him to the door, gave a low wistful whine, and, catching his master's glance, stretched himself across the threshold.

"I am so glad you are come, sir," said the old man, aroused by the sound of the well-known voice, as with a few words of tearful gratitude, Minnie hurried from the room.

“Why, my old friend? Why more than usual to-night? I trust you are not feeling worse.”

“No, sir, thank ye kindly; but my time is short, and I have not yet settled what to do about my poor little grandchild. ’Twill be a hard parting for her.”

“Ah! poor girl, yes. What do you say to her coming up to the Grange? I have no doubt my mother would find her very useful.”

“You’re truly kind, Sir Frederick. ’Twould be a great weight off my mind—if——”

“If what?”

“Why, sir, I thought her ladyship was going to live at Chesham. She told us so last time she was here.”

“I hope not—I trust not,” replied the Baronet. “Certainly not, if I can prevent it.”

Sir Frederick’s manner was slightly agi-

tated. The old man looked at him with an earnest curiosity.

“I must say it, sir. Maybe I’ll never have another chance. You’ve been a good landlord and a kind friend, and many and many a blessing do I owe to you and yours. From the day when I first hollowed you out a bit of a boat to float on the pond, d’ye remember, sir? ’Tis four-and-twenty years ago, come last March.”

“Perfectly ; the nurse left me to talk to her lover. Go on.”

“You fell in, and, as Heaven willed it, I was nigh enough to save you, and brought you into this very room ; and you put your little arms round my neck, and said, ‘Papa and mamma ’ll be so glad.’ From that day to this you’ve always seemed to me like one o’ my own.”

With an involuntary warmth of feeling, Sir Frederick bent down, and touched the

old man's forehead, where the brown hue of toil had lost itself in the whiteness of approaching dissolution.

"And now that you're going to be married, you don't look as cheerful like as should be. I can't bear to see it, and I've thought so much about it lately. My dear young master—you'll forgive an old man's boldness, sir—don't, pray don't marry unless you can be happy."

A fit of coughing came on, and he fell back exhausted. The Baronet did not reply, but he got him a glass of water, and arranged his pillow.

"You're not angry, Sir Frederick?"

"Angry? My good old friend, how could I be angry?"

* * * * *

As Sir Frederick departed, Minnie returned to her former post by her grandfather's side. It was growing dusk, and

she thought he ought to be in bed, though with an intuitive perception of how the case stood, the doctor said it did not really signify. He appeared to be asleep ; it was too dark to see to work, but a candle would probably disturb him, so she sat there in the gathering twilight until the surrounding stillness oppressed her with a superstitious terror. The house was long and rambling, the cattle sheds were far removed, and the farm labourers quite at the other end, so that Minnie was comparatively alone. Alone, or worse than alone, with the white face and shrouded form seen dimly through the deepening shade, with a something ghastly in its aspect. The different articles of furniture took a strange and unnatural appearance. Monsters of huge form and grotesque outline seemed to be mocking her with noiseless laughter, while the large Dutch clock in the corner tormented her with its

wearisome monotony. 'There it went on with its remorseless tick, tick—"for ever, never"! as it did yesterday and the day before, and would do to-morrow, and the day after, when perhaps she only would be left to hear it. To her excited fancy it was calling her grandfather away. "Come, come; come, come." He might not be with her many hours, and still the seconds sped on unpityingly, falling like stones in the fathomless well of eternity. It would surely drive her mad! She could bear it no longer, and involuntarily rose, intending to take off the weights, when a shadow suddenly interposed between her and the fast-fading light that came in under the porch. There was no mistaking the intruder; she felt rather than recognised the presence of her evil genius, and, too much startled to scream, stood rooted to the spot, pale and trembling.

Sir Desborough, for it was he, did not immediately come forward. He had evidently feigned an errand.

“Miss Brooks, is it not? I thought I could not be mistaken. Would you kindly tell me whether——”

Finding that Minnie neither spoke nor moved, he concluded she was alone, and entered the room, probably attributing her speechless emotion to a flattering cause. Still she did not appear to shun him, in truth, she was paralysed and had scarcely breathed since her heart, or rather instinct, told her he was near. Emboldened by her seeming passiveness, he threw his arm round her, and kissed her passionately again and again. It was too late to resist; a slight girl's strength is as nothing in a strong man's grasp.

“At last, sweet one, darling!” The words were soft, but there was a savage

triumph in their tone. Strange that the old farmer did not awake from his long sleep! Half-fainting, Minnie roused herself to call him. "Grandfather, grandfather, help!" a deep-drawn sob beneath each breath, as if her whole soul were escaping in the struggle. And no wonder that she suffered. Minnie was virtuous, but she had once loved that bold bad man, and now in the treacherous darkness, clasped to his breast, with his lips pressed to hers, and his words of insidious tenderness sounding in her ears, the old love came back with terrible distinctness. That demonstrative affection would be such happiness to her if only it were not all sin! Alas, alas, for the reality! There was a wild self-abandonment in that piteous appeal, "Grandfather, grandfather, help!" And help was granted, though not in the way expected. "O God, he does not hear me!" she exclaimed, in a tone

of such heart-rending agony, that Sir Desborough unwittingly relaxed his hold. Breaking from him, she threw herself on her knees by the couch, and laid her face on the old man's hand. It was cold !





CHAPTER XX.

FOILED.



FOR a moment Sir Desborough stood spell-bound, even his selfish nature touched and softened by the sad scene before him, of which he took in the details at a glance ; then, going up to the weeping girl, he attempted to soothe her by caresses. But she shrank from him, as though his touch were that of heated iron, moaning in wild agony.

“ He is dead, he is dead, and I never told him, never asked him to forgive me !”

“ Minnie, dear Minnie, listen.”

“ No, no, go away and leave me. Don’t

you see he is dead, my kind old grandfather? But for you I should never have deceived him. Have you no heart that you can look on without shame—shame for you, shame, oh, double shame for me! I, who never knew what it was to tell a lie before!” said the poor child, growing eloquent as the tide of self-reproach waxed stronger.

“Have I no heart?” muttered Sir Desborough, under his breath. “No heart, indeed! If I hadn’t, my pretty censor, I should certainly not be lingering on this dangerous ground. It won’t do for me to stay much longer; some one may come, and then the fact of my being in the neighbourhood will get blown at the Grange. D—— Morton’s Quixotism! Why need he constitute himself the protector of damsels in distress? Distress, forsooth! The little fool, she’d be a deal better off with me! If I only knew for certain, that——”

He looked back irresolutely through the porch, where the daylight still lingered, faintly blended with the brightness of the harvest moon; then aloud—

“Minnie, darling, you are alone in the world now. Come to me. Let me try what I can do to make you happy. I will take you abroad. No one need know anything about it. There will be no one to censure or find fault with you there; and I—well, you know how I love you. Look up, my pretty one. Say yes. In a fortnight I shall return and claim you. Then no one shall separate us. Say yes, darling. You could not possibly love that poor old man as I shall teach you to love me.”

So pleaded Sir Desborough in the half light of the autumn evening. And, at the time, he thought that he was speaking the truth. He did care for Minnie Brooks as much as it was possible for him to care for

anybody besides himself. A fortnight? Why should he wait a fortnight? It would be cruel to leave her alone with the dead! Surely the kindest thing that he could do would be to take her away with him at once.

And again, heedless of the awful presence of death, he put his arm around the trembling girl, and with tender words and soft caresses, strove eagerly to bend her to his purpose.

But Minnie would not be persuaded. Her good angel was in the ascendant, and for awhile she had courage to stand firm.

“Go away!” she exclaimed, passionately.
“Go away. I hate you!”

Sir Desborough smiled: her tone would change by-and-by. His standard of women was not a high one. With him every little spurt of resistance served as an incentive to the chase.

It is probable that he would have attempted to accomplish his desire by force—carrying her off, so to speak, from under the very windows of the Grange—if the sound of approaching footsteps had not warned him to desist. With a suppressed oath he withdrew, promising himself to succeed better on the morrow,

As he left the room the strain on his listener's nerves relaxed, and when the woman who had been hired to superintend the household came in to assist in putting the invalid to bed, she found Minnie on the floor in a deep swoon, still clinging to her grandfather's hand.

The next day she was removed to the Grange, but no one ever knew the secret of that evening.

* * * *

After taking leave of the old farmer, Sir Frederick walked slowly and thoughtfully in

the direction of the Park. Passing the second gate he caught sight of Lenham, who had been down to the farm, and was now leisurely retracing his steps. Ponto immediately sprang after him, nearly bringing him to the ground in his delighted recognition.

“Halloa, Morton. So there you are at last!”

“Why, Harry! Who on earth would dream of seeing you here? Did you get my letter?”

“Yes, on Tuesday morning.”

On this particular occasion, Sir Frederick appeared determined to keep all the conversation to himself. A school feast; a ball for the tenantry; decorations and improvements, with other subjects of apparently interminable interest, came up one after the other in quick and animated succession; but without a word of individual rejoicing.

After vainly endeavouring to "edge in," Lenham exclaimed, abruptly—

"Do stop, Morton. Another time I should be only too happy to listen; but I came down expressly to talk to you, and shall be off again to-morrow morning before breakfast. You must give me a few moments, and better here than elsewhere."

"Well — what is it? Down, Ponto, down, sir!"

And then there was an ominous silence, which made even the blunt soldier feel excessively uncomfortable; while Ponto, unaccustomed to rebuff, slunk behind with a cowed, dissatisfied air.

"You, Morton, are the dearest friend I have; but to tender you my congratulations on your approaching marriage would be a simple mockery."

"Let it pass," replied Sir Frederick, with

a faint attempt at a smile. "I know Marion is no favourite of yours."

"It isn't that alone. This sudden fancy of yours puzzles me. I feel as if you had somehow got yourself into a scrape. Dear old fellow, don't be angry. Do you really care for her?"

"Do you suppose I would marry her if I did not?"

There was a touch of reproach in the cold penetrating tone. Lenham felt as if he had gone a little too far.

"But you do not love her as you are capable of loving—not as I shall love if ever I chance to marry?"

It was a cruel thrust. Comparisons generally are.

"Perhaps not. Such love is not given to many."

"Oh, Morton, do not think so. Why should it not be in store for you, as well as

for others? You are still young; there is time enough to wait. Pray don't marry unless you can be happy. Marriage is no light matter; there is no getting away from it; however galling the chain, you must wear it."

"It is too late, Lenham. My honour is pledged."

If Lenham swore inwardly, he no longer attempted to argue. The latter half of the sentence completely staggered him. To his keen sense of justice, it altered the case entirely. Honour before happiness. Morton was right.

"You are satisfied she loves you?"

"Perfectly satisfied. My dear Harry, don't try to infect me with the blues. Depend upon it, we shall be very happy—in time."

"The last two words were spoken aside.

Was Captain Lenham uncharitable

when, in the face of his friend's emphatic declaration, he perversely muttered to himself—

“She love Morton. Bosh!”

We shall see.





CHAPTER XXI.

SHOWS HOW THE PAST AND THE FUTURE ARE
BOUND IN THE CHAIN OF THE PRESENT.



WHILE preparations for this ill-omened marriage are transacting at the Grange, let us for a brief period revisit the banks of the Arno.

Lord Oxenten's health was outwardly re-established, but the unacknowledged shadow of depression had gradually grown deeper, though at the same time perhaps, it was less distinguishable on account of the surrounding gloom. Day after day he would sit motionless for hours, holding Lucia in his arms. Lingered through months of painful suspense, she became at length too

weak to walk across the room. The last great change was approaching step by step. Surely he must have seen it!

Whatever his secret impression, no word of despondency was ever suffered to escape him. Lucia's reason was partially restored, but no effort of science or affection could arouse in her a distinct recollection of the past. At times conscious of her husband's presence, clinging to him with an apprehensiveness that proved how great had been her terror of desertion; and murmuring his name in loving tones, which at such seasons made the tide of self-reproach unbearable: at others estranged, delirious, turning from him with a shrinking almost equivalent to positive aversion—she gave no ground on which to build a hope for the future. How much the young Earl had dwelt on the thought of her ultimate recovery was only casually revealed.

Dr. Carvell had long since returned to his family, but he continued to call at the villa every morning and evening. On one of these occasions Lord Oxenten met him with an unusually animated countenance.

“ Lucia is better.”

The physician looked very grave and sad.

“ You do not think so ? Come and see.”

He led the way with an eager, agitated haste. Dr. Carvell followed slowly, so slowly that the Earl turned back more than once, as though chiding his delay.

Lucia was lying down ; her rich hair clustering in dark masses over her neck and shoulders. She had fallen asleep. A shadowy smile floated over her child-like features ; her lips were slightly parted, and there was a faint colour on her cheek. That calm and placid slumber could hardly be the precursor of the dreamless rest that

knows no waking this side heaven. So reasoned unreasoning affection.

“She has been much more like her natural self to-day,” whispered the Earl, seemingly afraid of disturbing Lucia, and yet, he knew not why, irresistibly impelled to break that ominous silence.

Dr. Carvell hesitated; his face was in the shade, and something very like a tear glistened in the keen grey eyes. Presently he leant over the couch, and gently, so gently that one might wonder how he did it, took one of the small emaciated hands in his own broad palm.

“Do you not think she looks much better?” exclaimed the young nobleman at last, in a tone of fretful impatience, checked in the moment of utterance, but sufficient to betray the uncertain nature of his hopes; the little ripple on the surface, while the tempest surged beneath.

There was no reply in words, but Dr. Carvell turned and faced his interlocutor.

Lord Oxenten became deadly pale. Motioning the physician to follow him, he entered an adjoining apartment, and closing the door, sat down. A sudden fit of trembling came on ; it passed as quickly as it came, and the next minute he looked up sternly, terribly calm.

“Now then, tell me.”

It was soon told. We all know what it is. There are few of us who have not felt it in its heartrending reality. The Earl buried his face in his hands until a circle of unnatural white marked the pressure of his fingers ; but no other sign, neither voice nor sigh bore witness to the avalanche of sorrow which had fallen on the shrine of his household treasures. By-and-by he staggered to his feet, gazing wildly around him, like a man aroused from some horrible dream.

The doctor took a phial from his pocket, and filling a wineglass with water, poured into it a few drops of a cordial that he was accustomed to carry with him. Lord Oxenten drank it off mechanically.

“I will stay and watch with you to-night.”

“Ay, do : but remain here for the present. I have much to do, much to say—and—and——”

He broke down ; then, mastering his emotion by a violent effort—

“I will call you if any change takes place. Meanwhile, Christian will get you anything you may require.”

It had come at last. The grim spectre that had so long played fast and loose for the wrecks of his earthly happiness, now looked him in the face, the winner. Vain all the tumult of affection, the agonized entreaty, the drowning grasp at the straw that

could not save. Nevertheless this one dark day had the advantage over many months preceding, in that he knew the worst, and was in a certain sense prepared for it.

Presently Lucia opened her eyes, and fixed them on her husband with a glance of mute inquiry. His lips quivered, he could not be the first to break that silence; but when her hand sought his, he caught it passionately, and kneeling down by the side of the couch, laid his cheek close to it. His ark of comfort, his beautiful beloved one, drifting far out on the fathomless ocean of eternity, leaving him alone upon the strand! It was hard, very hard to flesh and blood, and tenderness and manhood. A storm of love and anguish raged fiercely in the young Earl's breast, though he succeeded in restraining himself for awhile. The time to indulge his grief would come—but not now.

The sands of his twin life ran low, and the moments were too precious to be wasted.

“Where am I, Arthur? When did you return?”

Lord Oxenten’s heart smote him as he listened. During the past four months, Lucia had seldom spoken anything but English; now, in the closing hours of existence, the rich native tongue came back. It was a cheerless omen. With a stifled sigh, he put his arm round her, resting her head upon his shoulder. In this position she could not see the traces of uncontrollable remorse that every now and then swept across his countenance.

“Have I been dreaming, Arthur? I thought we had a child; a pretty little bright-eyed boy. He was like you, and I called him by your name; his baby kisses

cheered me in your absence, till—till——
It is all dark—I cannot recollect.”

She put her hand to her head, pushing back the masses of dark hair.

“ Was it true, Arthur ? ”

“ Quite true, my darling. Our little one is well. Shall I send for him ? ”

“ Yes, please, dear.” And she nestled in his arms with a quiet content, as though the consciousness of his presence were to her the fulness of happiness. Lord Oxenten’s eyes grew dim. The confiding gentleness of Lucia’s disposition, to him seemed to make the task of resignation harder. Scarcely daring to trust himself to speak, he rang a small silver bell, which stood upon the table. Dr. Carvell, whose ear was strained to catch the faintest summons, entered the room before the nurse, overpowered by long watching, could rouse herself to the exertion of moving.

“Would you ask Christian to bring the child in five or ten minutes?”

He was probably anxious to prolong the interval. Little Arte's untutored innocence would only smile when his father's heart was breaking.

After a pause, Lucia tried to raise herself in order to look into her husband's face.

“Why did you stay away so long, dear Arthur? And why did you not write to me? Ah, you made me so unhappy. I wonder I did not die.”

“My father would not consent to my leaving England,” replied the Earl, hoarse with agitation; “then he became very ill, and died. I could not start till the day after the funeral; but I did write to you, my darling, I did indeed; only by some strange fatality the letters never reached you.”

There were large heat drops on his fore-

head, and a great sob of agony rose to his lips.

“Lucia, my precious Lucia, I was a coward, a mean-spirited coward. My father might have disinherited me, for the estates were not entailed, and I was afraid to brave his anger. That was the reason I left my pet dove alone so long. But my heart never wandered from you, my own dear wife. Never, Lucia, never once in that terrible year of separation had I a thought or wish for any one but you! My own, my darling, say that you forgive me.”

A large tear forced its way, and fell on the pale face beneath. Lucia started.

“Forgive you? Arthur, my husband, dearer to me than all the world. Forgive you, yes, yes, a thousand times.”

Their lips met in a long passionate embrace, and then a smile of ineffable happiness illumined the features of the dying girl,

as her head fell back into its original position. Yes, she was dying. He did not know it; but there was a something unearthly in her expression that made him hold his breath, and draw her closer to his breast in fear.

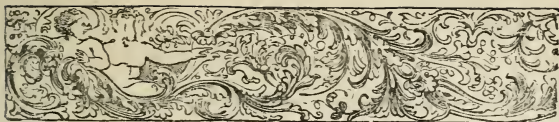
The entrance of the baby Viscount recalled a momentary animation.

“My child, my pretty one,” she murmured, feebly extending her arms. “Bless—bless——”

Vainly struggling for utterance, she turned her eyes towards the Earl with a look of deep love and pity, such as perchance the angels wear. It would be worse for him !

The next moment he called aloud.

Dr. Carvell hurried to the room, but it was too late. The fragile beautiful house was tenantless, and the spirit had returned to its Creator, God.



CHAPTER XXII.

ON EARTH PEACE.



GRIEF has many varied manifestations. Lord Oxenten neither wept nor resisted when the inanimate form of his departed wife was taken from him to be prepared for its final resting-place, and, during the days that followed, his bearing was unusually composed and stern. He got up at his accustomed hour, dressed with his wonted regard to neatness and elegance, and, though he ate but little, went through the ceremony of breakfast and dinner as if all things were as they had been, or as if he imagined them unchanged. He gave

the necessary orders for the funeral, took his station as chief mourner, leaning heavily on Dr. Carvell's arm, returned alone to the villa, largely recompensed and then discharged the nurse and other attendants of his lost love, locked up the suite of apartments that had been appropriated to her use, and relapsed into a solitary style of living, without the least external evidence of deeply-rooted sorrow. He devoted an hour every morning to his child, but at such seasons he chose to be alone, and no traces of emotion were visible when the nurse came in to relieve him of his charge. There was one who viewed this apparent apathy with a dissatisfaction akin to terror. That one was Christian Andersen. "Anything but that—anything but that," he would cry despairingly, when returning from some useless errand in Lord Oxenten's study, invented merely to ascertain what he

was doing. The pale, grave countenance, the stern set eyes that never seemed to see anything before them; the thin nervous hands, white and delicate as a woman's, holding some book or paper, of which the absent mind was obviously unconscious—haunted the old servant with an undefined presentiment of evil. Of all that had so recently transpired, there was but one discernible result: the Earl's hair had suddenly grown grey, not grey entirely, but here and there a streak of silver parting the raven clusters of which in earlier days his faithful dependent was wont to be so proud.

It was about a fortnight after poor Lucia's death. Contrary to his usual practice, Lord Oxenten had been writing nearly the whole day. Long after the household had retired to rest, Christian lay awake, pondering the late sad events in his master's history, and vainly endeavouring to account for his own

increasing anxiety. Between twelve and one, he fancied he heard a step in one of the neighbouring apartments; then the same step stealing quietly downstairs, an ominous click, the sound of a door gently opened, and, as it appeared to his excited imagination, the echo of less guarded movements in the distance. The old man was very tired and nearly asleep. Perhaps it was only the influence of an unquiet dream; he would close his eyes, and think no more about it. Then, all at once, a horrible dread rose up before him. He gasped for breath as the bare possibility of its realization suggested itself; and, hastily rising, struck a light, and dressed himself with whatspeed his trembling fingers would allow. Passing the intervening corridors with cautious tread, he approached Lord Oxenten's chamber, and listened eagerly. Not a breath, not a sound, disturbed the quietude of night. In the first instance, the

noise seemed to proceed from the deserted suite of rooms once appropriated to the deceased Countess. Had *he* been there, and why?

Christian hesitated, then knocked gently two or three times.

“My lord.”

There was no answer, and unable to bear the suspense, he opened the door. It was as his fears foreboded; the bed had not been slept in, and the room was empty. Returning, he tried to enter the Countess's apartment. It was locked; but, just without, there lay a glove. Terror-winged, he reached the hall, put down his lamp, and hurried out. It was not dark, but, even if it had been, he knew the way too well. Through the pale grey olives, down the side of the hill, winding along the valley at its base, where the Italian wife and mother slept among her own people where the new moon faintly silvered the sad earth, and the chill night-dew fell heavily

on the dank grass, and the wreaths of everlasting flowers, where the Parian marble cross marked the resting-place of the beautiful and young—surely he recognised that prostrate figure.

“My lord, my dear, dear master!”

A start of shuddering consciousness, a stifled sigh, almost a groan, told him that he had arrived in time.

“Thank God!”

“Is it you, Christian? Why are you here? Go away; leave me; I wish to be alone.”

It was no season for unquestioning obedience. The horrible dread rose up again before him—there, by that new-made grave.

“My lord.”

The Earl only responded by an angry gesture.

“My lord, I am an old man. Have pity on me. I cannot, I dare not go away and leave you.”

He did not say why. He left that to keen-eyed conscience ; to the God above ; to the angel of mercy who might haply rend aside the veil from the unforgivable sin before it was too late.

Lord Oxenten did not seem to hear, or hearing took no heed, as he lay stretched across the sod, his head resting on the tomb of his lost wife. Oh, to live over again the past two years ! Perish wealth and honours and position, only give back that cherished life to modulate and sanctify his own ! It might not be !

The pale moonlight fell on the old man's snow-white hair, as he stood with clasped hands by the side of the prostrate Earl ; it shimmered and shivered over the distant urns and tablets with a strange ethereal lustre, and rested, or appeared to rest, with a steadier radiance on the slab of a neighbouring monument, where a sculptured angel with

palm-branch and crown seemed to be ascending heavenward from a shrouded bier, below which was engraven with startling distinctness, as it struck Christian in such a scene, and at such an hour—

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace.”

On earth peace! And from the grave came the pitiful cry of despair.

“To die—only to die! Lucia! My lost Lucia!”





CHAPTER XXIII.

TELLS WHO IT WAS THAT LOOKED FROM THE
WINDOW IN OXENTEN RECTORY.

SIR FREDERICK MORTON sat alone in the old library at Donnington, an open letter in his hand. It was within three weeks of the day appointed for his marriage, and that very morning he had arranged to go to London to consult his solicitor respecting the settlements. There was a look of mingled perplexity and vexation on his countenance, which deepened as he re-read the letter.

Presently Lady Morton came into the room.

“My dear Frederick, you will lose the

train. I heard you say you could not afford to waste a whole day in riding."

"Nor can I," replied the Baronet. "However, I shall not go to town to-day. Oxenten has written to ask me to see his agent on business that he cannot trust to another."

"Lord Oxenten ! Does he give any reason for his long silence, or tell you anything about his marriage ?"

"No."

"Well, I must say what I think. Such conduct is anything but friendly. And then he coolly asks you to put yourself out of the way to do him a service ! How does he attempt to excuse himself ?"

"His note is only remarkable for its brevity," rejoined Sir Frederick, dryly. "You had better read it, and then you can judge for yourself."

Lady Morton perused it without comment.

“What do you intend to do?”

“Go down immediately. I must write to Fearon, and get him to make another appointment.”

“And Marion?”

“Ah! It is certainly vexatious. Well, I must tell her the truth. There is no help for it.”

“But, my dear boy, why need you disappoint her? I do not think Lord Oxenten has treated you properly. Why should you put yourself out of the way for him?”

“There is no quarrel between us, mother. Every man has a right to give or withhold his confidence.”

“It is very kind of you to excuse him; but you see, dear, you might take your week in town, and go down there afterwards. It could not make much difference.”

“I am not so sure of that. At all events, I have made up my mind; and

while I write my letters, perhaps, as you are going out, you will tell Hawley to take the horses back to the stables. I shall want the travelling carriage, and my portmanteau—and——”

“Why, Frederick, you are surely not going to stay?”

“In all probability I shall be away some days. What does it matter where I spend them?”

“But it may make Marion unhappy?”

“I trust Marion is too sensible to grieve about anything so trivial.”

His tone was slightly abrupt, and evidently intended to close the conversation. Strange that her thoughts should again revert to the little green pocket-book and the lock of soft dark hair.

The village of Oxenten lay about thirty miles to the west of Donnington. Sir Frederick did not arrive at the Castle until

late that evening. The next morning he was up at daybreak, had a consultation with the steward before breakfast; and then, taking one of the Earl's horses, rode over unattended to the agent's.

Mr. Macfarlane was out, and not expected home for some hours. Not knowing exactly what to do with himself *ad interim*, the Baronet resolved to pay a visit to the Rector, whom he had not seen since the late Lord Oxenten's funeral. As he dismounted at some distance from the house, before a white gate, which he found rather difficult to open, a boy, who was working in the garden, ran forward to tender his assistance. As he came nearer, the little fellow's face lighted up with a joyous welcome.

"You 'ere, sir. Ben't I glad. 'Ope you're well, sir." Then seeing the Baronet look puzzled, "Beg yer honour's pardon, you've forgotten you'se so kind to me, maybe?"

Sir Frederick had forgotten ; but he was essentially good-natured, and without reproving the boy's volubility, inquired where and how he had met him.

“ You give me a shillin' once when I'se sweepin' a crossin' in Belgravy. Yer honour wer' talkin' wi' a lady.”

Sir Frederick started as if he had been shot. Recollection flashed upon him in a moment. If he had ever deluded himself with a belief in the possibility of forgetfulness, those words had undeceived him. The boy, though naturally observant, was just then too much engrossed by the interest of his own narrative, and the amusement of stroking the pretty horse's neck, to perceive that his auditor turned deadly pale, and grasped the pommel of the saddle for support.

“ The lady told me, afore she went away, maybe I'd get work aisy in the country, and

when she come here, I come too as soon as I could. Yer honour give me sixpence on the way. I know'd yer agin at once. The master's werry kind, and when Miss Moorfield axed un, he give me odd jobs in the garden, run on errands like, and he lets me sleep in the stebbles wi' the 'osses."

Sir Frederick's nerves were strung almost to agony, which the boy seemed pertinaciously determined to lengthen, though to do the little fellow justice he was totally unconscious of the effect of his words.

"You speak of Miss Moorfield as if she were here, boy. Where is she?"

The voice was low and husky, and no wonder. The Baronet was nearly choking in the struggle to maintain his self-command.

Willie Grey's large brown eyes opened wider in suddenly-aroused perception. London-bred, he was sharper than most of his years.

“Why, sir, she’s the guv’ness.”

“Do you mean to say Miss Moorfield is there—there in that house?” And he turned towards the Rectory with a defiantly-longing though agonized expression.

“Please, yer honour, she ben’t there ’sackly at this werry minnit. She be gone to take the childer to spend the day wi’ their aunt at Rosenby Willa, t’other side of the Castle.”

“Is she going to stay with them at Rosenberg?”

“No, sir; I know she be a comin’ ’ome, cos she said as how she’d teach me to read a bit this arternoon.”

“Can you take a message?”

“Maybe I could, sir, if ye’d jest tell the master.”

“I will tell him; that is, if he says anything about it. Now, listen—no, stay.”

Tearing a leaf from his pocket-book, he wrote—

“Edith,—For God’s sake see me. Wait in the Park Avenue. I will join you there. —F. M.”

He folded and directed the tiny slip of paper; then putting it, with half-a-crown, into the boy’s hand, asked him—

“Can you read?”

“No, sir; can’t read ’ritin’ no ’ow; only knows my letters on a book. Miss Moorfield’s a teachin’ on me now.”

Again and again that name! The Baronet put his hand to his forehead.

“There, run! Take that to Miss Moorfield; you need not say anything; there is no answer. She can only come back one way, can she?”

“Why, sir, she could; but none on ’em ever do. They allors come round the Close, and through the Park Avingue,

unless Miss Moorfield should chance to go to any o' the cottagers ; howsomever, if she do, I'll find her."

"That will do. Now run."

The little fellow started at full speed, winged by the bright half-crown, and not less by the hope of pleasing the kind gentleman.

Sir Frederick stood for some seconds in a state of breathless agitation ; then, by a violent effort, mastering his emotion, walked up the carriage drive, the horse's bridle hanging on his arm. He would gladly have avoided meeting any of the Rector's family, but as in all probability he had been seen from the house, to depart without calling might give rise to remark ; the boy would naturally be questioned, and suspicion alight on another. It was with great difficulty he could force himself to answer the many kind inquiries that were showered upon

him with unremitting perseverance. The young Earl's protracted absence, his unaccountable neglect of letters (which hurt the Rector sorely, though he was too guarded to express any feelings of annoyance), and various unpleasant rumours that had got afloat respecting his intention of residing on the Continent, furnished other topics of apparently interminable interest. What Sir Frederick knew he kept to himself; but it was not so easy to be calm and agreeable when the conversation veered round to his own approaching marriage, and common politeness compelled him to make a suitable reply to the warm congratulations that were called forth by the prospect of his contracting so desirable a union. Those kind words fell upon his tortured ears like coals of fire. To prolong the interview would drive him wild, so, pleading an important engagement, he rose to take leave,

tormented to the last by the Rector, who with good-humoured obtuseness, insisted on accompanying him to the gate, and would doubtless have detained him there another quarter of an hour if he had not abruptly broken from him.





CHAPTER XXIV.

CHIT-CHAT.



FINE young man! A very fine young man!" observed Mr. Seagraves, returning to his pretty wife, who stood at the window in a fit of abstraction. "Don't you think so, my dear?"

"I—— What did you say, Robert? Oh yes; he is good-looking enough," rejoined the lady, drily; "but the more I think of him the more he puzzles me. I really cannot understand the formal courtship of these days."

"To what does that sapient remark

tend?" inquired the Rector, passing his arm round her waist.

"Why, this Sir Frederick Morton, whom you admire so much, on the eve of being married to the woman whom he professes to love above all others, looks for all the world as if he were going to be buried alive!"

"Nelly! Nelly! don't be uncharitable; though to tell the truth, I noticed it too. He is certainly paler, and more grave than he used to be; and yet, do you know, on the whole, I think he looks better than he did at the Earl's funeral."

"Very likely," laughed Mrs. Seagraves, "considering that on that particular occasion you came home and said you were afraid both Sir Frederick Morton and Lord Oxenten were in a decline! Now, Robert, it is no good denying it. You know you said so."

“Well, well, my dear, I am glad I was mistaken. Where are the children, Nelly?”

“What a memory you have! Gone to spend the day with Jane, of course, or I should have sent for them to see our visitor. Perhaps, though, it was as well not: he would only have frightened them with his grave looks.”

“Poor Sir Frederick! he has certainly not succeeded in making a favourable impression!”

“I don’t believe he is one bit in love with the girl he is engaged to marry. Didn’t you say she had a deal of money?”

“My dear wife, you are really too severe. Sir Frederick is far too proud a man to sell himself for gold. Besides, there is no need for it. He has enough and to spare. The Mortons are known to be exceedingly wealthy. Why should their

last representative look out for a rich bride ?”

“I don’t know, certainly ; but I pity Miss Hayes.”

“Reserve your sympathy, my dear. I doubt not she will be exceedingly happy.”

“That is because you have such an absurdly high opinion of this Sir Frederick. Well, I know I should not like to change places with his fiancée.”

“Nor should I like you to do so,” said the Rector, with an amused laugh ; “but a truce, Nelly. Where is Miss Moorfield ?”

“Gone with the children.”

“Is she going to spend the day at Rosenberg ?”

“No. As usual she excused herself, saying she would far rather stay at home and help me with some of the parish work. What a treasure that girl is ! And yet,

somehow or other, Robert, do you know she often puzzles me?"

"Another enigma, Nelly. Well, this time I am decidedly at fault. I don't recollect anything incomprehensible in Edith Moorfield."

"Why, to begin with, she is so pretty and——"

"Women can't help being pretty."

Her husband's voice and smile brought a soft girlish blush to the young wife's face. She was scarcely five-and-twenty; and there was almost that number of years difference in their respective ages; yet, strange to say, both had married from affection.

"How tiresome you are, Robert. You always will laugh at everything I say. What I mean is this. It is odd that, being so attractive, she should show such an utter aversion to men's society."

"Not more odd than the dislike she shows

to society in general. Circumstanced as she is, I consider her exclusiveness not only justifiable, but necessary. I never yet told you, Nelly, that when I went to London to engage a governess during your illness, Miss Moorfield confided to me a great portion of her history."

"Oh, Robert, why did you not tell me before? You know how fond I am of her—how much I liked her from the first."

"Partly, my dear, because you never asked me any questions after I told you that she was an orphan; and partly because, had I named it at the time, or before you had learnt to value her as she deserves, it might have left an unfavourable impression on your mind."

"Surely there is nothing to conceal—nothing wrong? Oh, Robert, our children."

"Are quite safe in her charge. My

darling wife, I think most highly of Edith Moorfield. She is merely an unfortunate child; one of those whom society bans, visiting the sins of the parents on their unoffending offspring. She was born without wedlock, and orphaned in her birth: indebted even for her life to the charity of a stranger, who brought her up and educated her as her own daughter. The death of this good Samaritan, whose name by courtesy she bears, cast her again upon the world at the early age of fifteen."

"Oh, how dreadful! Who was her father?"

"Nobody knows; and yet, to judge by her refined and gentle bearing, the most commonplace observer would imagine her well-born."

"Poor girl! How she must have suffered in telling you all this."

"Yes, indeed; but to do so was her

only safe plan. Nothing less than this outspoken confidence would have induced me to engage her without references."

"I thought I understood from you that she had been a governess before."

"True, but she lost her situation (through no fault of her own, poor child), and her hard-hearted employers told her not to apply to them for a reference. I heard something of the story through a young medical friend. He said Miss Moorfield was sent away because her good looks attracted the notice of some rich landowner, whom Mrs. Elliot, that was the lady's name, had fixed on as a husband for her own eldest daughter."

"What a shame! And then to think that Edith's own father is probably moving in the very circle from which she is excluded!"

“A strange, sad thought for her. To my mind it is comparatively easy to forgive a man whose passions lead him astray in a single instance, repented of as soon as committed, and repaired as far as it can be. (God knows how he will be judged hereafter, with that we have nothing to do); but I can neither forgive nor excuse those men — and they are legion — who brand the innocent with the stain of their crime, and then leave them to suffer and starve.”

“Poor girl! poor Edith! I am glad you have told me, Robert. I shall try to be even kinder to her now.”

The Park Avenue consisted of a long double line of fine old elms that bordered the Castle grounds, and which, since the decease of the late Lord Oxenten, had been thrown open to the public. As Sir Frederick passed through the first gate,

he caught sight of little Willie Grey running breathlessly homewards.

“I seed her, sir, and give her the note. She wer a long way t’other side o’ the Close.”

The Baronet forced himself to ejaculate, “All right,” and then got off his horse. He might meet her any moment.

“Shall I ’old un for ’ee, sir?”

“No, boy, no.”

Seeing that his services were no longer required, Willie respectfully doffed his cap and went on; thinking on the road how many nice things he could purchase for a whole half-crown, and wishing he had a mother or a sister to share in his good fortune.

Sir Frederick was left alone, his arm across the horse’s neck, walking with a slow constrained movement, like one who feels that the crisis of his fate is come. What

should he do? Break his engagement with Marion Hayes, laugh the trammels of society to scorn, and be free?

The temptation rose up vividly before him, the whole strength of his fiery, passionate manhood armed itself against the solitary plea of honour, and he groaned in bitterness of spirit as the inward strife waxed fiercer and fiercer. A few short months ago he could not resolve to face the sneers and inuendo of the world. Now, if he had these alone to deal with, happiness would be already in his grasp; but fettered by his own unutterable folly, bound hand and foot by a dim consciousness of right, and the proud, though torturing remembrance that a Morton was never yet known to break his word—the pointed rock to which (like the shipwrecked mariner) he despairingly clung to save his higher nature at the expense of the lower—what he

suffered in that brief half hour would have brought most men to the verge of insanity. It was telling even on his iron nerves, when, raising his eyes, he saw at the farther end of the avenue a veiled figure coming steadily towards him.





CHAPTER XXV.

EDITH MOORFIELD.



AS Sir Frederick came nearer, Edith threw back her veil. To all appearance she was much the less agitated of the two; though her extreme paleness and the visible trembling of the small delicately-gloved hands, might perhaps have told a different story. The Baronet, however, saw only the clear beautiful features gradually settling in a fixed rigidity of purpose, the calm, almost haughty glance of the deep dark eyes gleaming beneath a broad white forehead, which was rendered still more striking by the finely-lined sweep of the

arched eyebrows, and there was a passionate reproach in his voice as he addressed her.

“ Edith, Edith ! No word, no welcome ? Have you nothing to say to me after a six months’ separation ? Are we strangers ? Wont you shake hands with me ? ”

The tone went to her heart ; yet she drew back, and the slight fingers closed over each other with a nervous pressure. She felt that her firmness was fast deserting her, and his touch might be fatal to them both.

The Baronet clutched the handle of his riding-whip till it broke like a reed in his grasp.

“ Do you wish to drive me mad ? ” he ejaculated, hoarsely. “ Do you think we are to meet like this, after the agony I have endured ever since I lost all trace of you in London ? Edith, we are alone ; I am no

longer my own master ; in pity to me, in pity to yourself, do not try me too far."

He was close to her now ; his great height towering above her. She could see the broad chest heaving tumultuously, and could hear the labouring catch of the heavily drawn breath, like the surge of the distant storm.

" Edith, are you ice ? Because, if so, I'm fire."

The words fell hissing almost in her ear. He had given the rein to his passion, and who could tell where it would end ? Edith's low silvery accents faltered perceptibly as she replied—

" Sir Frederick, is this just ? Is it kind, or right, thus to terrify me by your violence ; you a man, and I a defenceless girl ? I fear I have done very wrong in meeting you. They told me you were engaged to be married. Is it true ?"

The Baronet grew suddenly quiet. The sound of her voice appeared to exercise a soothing influence over him; but he did not attempt an answer, and his silence was "confirmation strong." Edith looked at him sorrowfully.

"I could hardly have believed this of you. When we parted in April last, and I gathered from several expressions which you incidentally let fall, that my birth was likely to prove an insuperable bar to our union; when I saw that the conflict of feeling between your love for me—for I knew you did love me, and that thought has been a comfort to me since, though now perhaps it is sin—when I saw that the conflict of feeling between your love for me, and the thousand antagonistic influences which surrounded your position, made you ill and miserable, and subjected me to misrepresentation and remark, my only safety

was in flight. We could not be married ; and nothing but madness or misery could possibly result from our intercourse. Why seek to renew it ?”

“ But, oh, Edith, had you no pity for me, no thought of what I should suffer, when I heard of your departure ? Why did you not trust me ? I would have married you, would have braved everything, and placed my fate in your hands.”

Edith’s lips moved faintly. They might have framed the words “ Not then,” but sound died in the utterance.

“ I went to London twice. The first time I called on the Elliots ; not seeing you with the children, I asked the nurse where you were. She told me you had left a fortnight previously, without giving an address. For three days I sought you in town, shunning all my own friends, and haunting every spot where I had seen you. For a long time I

could not resolve to say anything to Mrs. Elliot, knowing that she regarded you in some degree as her daughter's rival. Besides, why should I unnecessarily proclaim our secret? How could I for one moment imagine that you would not even write to me? Day after day passed, and week after week, and still no letter. Driven to desperation, I determined to set scandal at defiance, and by openly acknowledging my interest in your movements, find out what had become of you. I asked and obtained a private interview with Mrs. Elliot; and naturally concluding you must apply to her for references, implored her to aid me in the search. Misery! what did I hear? That you had left of your own accord, and the last time you had been seen by any of the family, you were in Kensington Park Gardens, in the company of Harvey Lennox."

A deep flush suffused Edith's countenance.

"Mrs. Elliot should have told you the whole truth. I did not quit her employment entirely of my own accord, though I intended to leave in order to avoid a temptation which I had not strength to resist. She said she thought my conduct extremely prejudicial to her daughter's interests, and that unless I could in some way alter it, I must consider our engagement at an end. I shall always count her harshness a mercy. Coming as it did, it drove me to do what was right."

"And the other part of the story, Edith—was that also an invention? I will not dwell upon her base insinuations; but tell me you were not seen talking to that man?"

"I may have been seen. I cannot say. At any rate, he was talking to me. It was

the day before I came down here. I had a wish to revisit the spot where we had met so often to say good-bye to it for your sake. On my way home (I had taken lodgings for a fortnight) Mr. Lennox joined me. He saw I was unhappy, and taking advantage of my misery, insisted on accompanying me as far as Hyde Park Corner, where, to escape his persecution, I got into a cab."

Edith's tears were falling fast. He had mistrusted her, and suspicion from the man she loves is a woman's sorest trial.

"I did not believe all I heard, Edith, but as month after month passed, and brought no tidings, I became sick at heart and restless. My mother wanted me to marry. I had unwittingly won the affection of a beautiful and amiable girl, and shrank from inflicting on another the anguish I was enduring myself. I had lost all hope of your discovery; doubt of your fidelity, indigna-

tion at your silence, drove me to despair, and, in an unguarded moment, my honour was pledged ; but oh, Edith, say that you forgive me ; tell me that I have not wrecked your happiness as well as my own !”

A hectic flush rose to Edith’s cheek.

“ I daresay I shall be very happy in time.”

“ And you will not hate me ? You will think of me as a friend ? You will pray—that—that——”

“ I will pray for you and for her.”

He came nearer, took both her hands in his, and bent down to kiss her forehead. Edith trembled and turned very white.

“ Leave me, Sir Frederick, I implore you. Be merciful ; do not prolong this torture. Let me go home.”

“ I will, I will ; but, Edith, say that you forgive me !”

“ I do ; we must forgive each other. I

may have wronged you ; I cannot tell. I did it for the best. It is useless to dwell upon the past. Farewell."

Drawing down her veil, she turned from him. The Baronet made no further effort to detain her. He stood motionless, watching her until she left the avenue, and was lost to view in the windings of the road ; then, suddenly recollecting his appointment with Mr. Macfarlane, he mounted and rode on slowly, the reins on his horse's neck. The way he chose was rather circuitous, but it might give him time to regain his self-command. However, he had not ridden far before some one called to him by name.

"Morton, is that brute to be trusted?"

The startled animal swerved aside, as a man jumped off a stile on the right, and placed himself in the middle of the road.

"Not in cases like that," replied the Baronet, forcing a laugh, though he wished

the intruder a hundred miles off. "Temple, is it really you? Where did you spring from?"

"I might ask you the same question, my friend, seeing that you are supposed to be in town."

"I? I came down yesterday to see about some business for Oxenten."

"Ha! Then he has written at last! What news?"

"None; that is, he says nothing about his marriage."

"Strange! I should have thought——"

"You have not yet favoured me with an answer," interposed Sir Frederick, wishing to avoid discussion. "What brought you here, of all places in the world? Is it a secret?"

"Yes, rather! I am trying to solve a mystery," rejoined the young lawyer, twirling his moustache with an air of impor-

tance; "but as I have been puzzling my brain to no purpose for the last three hours, I may as well walk on with you. A friend's society may sharpen my wits."

The Baronet flung himself from his horse, and passed his arm through the bridle-rein. Molyneux Temple glanced at him narrowly.

"Morton, you do not look well. What is the matter?"

"Nothing. My head aches."

"Ah, Lenham told me you had been doing too much. How absent I am. You got my letter, of course; but I might have had the grace to congratulate you in person. When is it to be?"

"This side of Christmas," returned Sir Frederick, almost driven mad by his own thoughts.

Molyneux Temple was silent for awhile;

then, without looking up, he exclaimed abruptly—

“Morton, should you care much about money? I mean in a wife?”

“I! Certainly not.”

— “And yet they say your bride that is to be is one of the richest heiresses in England. Suppose it were to turn out a myth, what then?”

“It would make no difference to me,” replied the Baronet, briefly, too miserable to express any surprise at this odd question, and longing to be left to himself.

As the remainder of the conversation between the two friends does not tend to elucidate our story, we will pass it over, and return to the Rectory.

As Edith came through the white gate she was met by the Rector’s wife, who, in a large straw hat and gardening gloves, was endeavouring to nail up some creepers

which had been rather roughly handled by the autumn winds.

“I’m so glad you are come, dear. You are taller than I am, and may perhaps be able to manage this tiresome branch without the help of a ladder.”

Edith took the hammer and essayed a few strokes; but the exertion was beyond her strength. She had kept up to the last, and the interview with Morton exhausted her powers of endurance. Now that she was no longer exposed to the terrible trial of his presence, the overwrought nerves gave way.

“Forgive me, dear Mrs. Seagraves, I am so dizzy. I cannot see to do it. I—I——”

And then the kind-hearted little woman first noticed how ill her young friend looked, and hurried her into the house.

“Edith, you are faint. Why did you

not tell me before? You must have a glass of wine, or sal-volatile ; something to revive you. Dear, where are my salts? Quick, Willie, open the door."

The boy, who had been picking up small stones under the direction of his mistress, hastened to obey, gazing after the two retreating figures with open mouth and a stare of bewilderment. He loitered about for some time ; but Mrs. Seagraves did not return to the garden again that day ; and Willie went to bed in the stables, curling himself up on the fresh sweet hay, with a slice of bread for his supper, and the new half-crown tied up in an old red handkerchief under his pillow, without being able to get any tidings of Miss Moorfield.



CHAPTER XXVI.

TELLS HOW MANY SINS WERE LAID TO SIR
FREDERICK'S ACCOUNT.

THE next morning at breakfast Edith's place was empty, and at ten o'clock the children were sent out with a servant.

The Rector and his wife, left to themselves, immediately began to talk over the occurrences of the preceding day.

"Have you succeeded in obtaining any clue to that poor girl's illness, Nelly?"

"I have thought of one; but the supposition seems so unlikely to prove correct, that I scarcely like to acknowledge it. You will laugh at me, Robert."

“ Never mind ; tell me.”

“ Well, I cannot help connecting Edith’s unhappiness (for her indisposition is more mental than physical) with the visit of Sir Frederick Morton.”

“ Strange ; the same thought occurred to me last night, though I could not account for it. It may be because in our quiet little village there are so few incidents worthy of remark that we naturally link one with another.”

At this juncture their tête-à-tête was interrupted by the entrance of Edith herself. She was very pale, but retained her usually quiet and ladylike demeanour. Mrs. Seagraves rose to greet her, while the Rector drew a large easy-chair to the fire.

“ My dear Edith, why did you get up ? I told you the children should have a holiday. It is excessively naughty of you. Why did you do it ?”

“ Because, dearest Mrs. Seagraves, I have a painful task before me. For my future peace of mind it is necessary that I should leave this neighbourhood at once ; and I want you to let me go away quietly, and not make the parting needlessly hard.”

“ Parting !” exclaimed the Rector and his wife in the same breath. “ Leave us ? Edith, you must be dreaming ! Why should you wish to go away ? Are you not happy here ?”

“ So happy, at least I have been, that the thought of leaving you almost breaks my heart. I shall never love any other friends so well ; but I go to avoid worse misery. It would be wicked of me to remain.”

“ Go to avoid worse misery ? Wicked to remain,” repeated the Rector to himself ; “ there is something in all this which I cannot understand.” Then aloud, “ Dear

Miss Moorfield, we are your true friends. Treat us with confidence ; tell us what has given rise to such a sudden resolution."

There was no answer. Edith hid her face and wept, while Mrs. Seagraves stood leaning over the back of her chair in sorrowful perplexity.

"Forgive me if I pain you ; but circumstanced as you are, without parents or relations, I should not be doing my duty in allowing you to depart unquestioned. I may be wrong, yet it strikes me forcibly that the visit of Sir Frederick Morton may have had something to do with your resolve."

Edith's whole frame shook with suppressed sobs. Mr. and Mrs. Seagraves looked at each other, and the latter laid her hand caressingly on her young friend's shoulder.

"Edith, poor child, I have heard some-

thing of your history, and can partly guess the remainder; but granting that this Sir Frederick Morton is the man on whose account (as my husband tells me) you were obliged to leave your previous situation, I do not see why his casual visit here need drive you away. You forget he is now engaged to be married."

"No, no!" cried Edith, wildly, starting from her chair; "it is just because I do not forget it that I dare not risk meeting him again."

"But, my dear child," indignantly exclaimed the Rector's wife, "he will not venture to persecute you here. Mr. Seagraves will see to that. It is disgraceful! An engaged man—as good as married! He ought to be ashamed of himself."

"You do not understand," moaned Edith; "he is miserable too. Oh, what have I said? He will think I have betrayed

him—made him contemptible in the eyes of the world.” Then, throwing herself on her knees before the Rector, “Pity me—send me away—or I shall go mad.”

Mr. Seagraves gently replaced her in her seat by the fire, while his wife knelt down to chafe the cold damp hands.

“Nelly, she is right. It would not be wise for her to remain. We must let her go, and the sooner the better. In a few months there may be a change. Dear Miss Moorfield, be calm, I entreat you ; you shall go to-day if you wish it ; only tell us where you are going, and what you intend to do.”

Drying her tears, Edith tried to smile, though it was not a very successful effort.

“You may remember my speaking of Jane Wilmot, an old servant of my adopted mother. She married a journeyman carpenter, and is now a widow, keeping a little

worsted shop in London. I had better not give you her address, yet in case——”

A choking sob prevented the completion of the sentence.

“You are right,” said the Rector, warmly. “We can trust you without it; and if any questions are asked, the answer will be easy—gone to spend some time with a friend. I see—not a bad idea.”

“I would rather not go out as a governess again,” continued Edith, mournfully. “I can help Jane with her worsted work, and perhaps sell some of my drawings. It does not much signify how I get a living. I have no one to care for me; no one to injure by lowering my position.”

Innocent victim of the world’s stern code of so-called morality—a morality which visits the offence on the defenceless, and lets the offender go free. Truly it did not “signify much.”

The Rector rose abruptly, apparently looking for something that was nowhere to be found. Had it a name ? It might have been justice.

“ You will want money to commence with.”

“ The whole of my last quarter's salary is as yet untouched, and I do not intend to be idle. The more I have to do the better.”

“ There is another quarter nearly due,” said the reverend gentleman, unlocking his cash-box, and taking thence a ten pound note, to which, after a moment's reflection, he added one of half the value. “ You must accept this as a parting gift from Mrs. Seagraves and myself. In a few months you may be willing to return to us. Now, although we shall all be very sorry to lose you, I cannot help feeling your decision is a wise one.”

“I can never thank you sufficiently,” began Edith, clinging to Mrs. Seagraves, who, on her part, could scarcely help crying. The Rector thinking this painful scene was likely to prove too much for them both, cut it short by saying—

“As soon as you are ready, I will drive you to the station.”

His wife understood the implied admonition, and restrained herself for the moment, only to exclaim with greater vehemence, when Edith had left the room—

“I declare it has quite upset me! And to think that man should be the cause of it all! I really do not like to tell the children. They are so fond of her.”

“Better spare them and her the pain of saying good-bye, dear Nelly. The poor girl looks wretchedly ill already. I am out of all patience with Sir Frederick, though it can hardly have been premeditated

on his part. I cannot understand it. He always seemed to me to be a man of very high principle; but to make love to one woman while engaged to another is more than inexcusable."

"Don't talk of it, Robert. You see I was not far wrong in my judgment."

Mr. Seagraves would not appear to notice the implied reproof.

"He must have met her returning from Rosenberg. Young Deverell told me he saw somebody talking to Miss Moorfield. I thought it odd at the time; but the idea of the stranger being Sir Frederick himself never struck me till late last evening."

"You do not surely intend to invite him here again?"

"He is not likely to put himself in the way of receiving any future invitation, when he hears (as in a place like this he is sure to hear from some of the villagers or

servants) that Miss Moorfield has left us. You may be quite sure he would never dream of applying to me for any information respecting her movements. If he did I should know how to receive him."

"But you asked him to dine with us one day during his stay at the Castle."

"I cannot help that now, my dear. In all probability he will send an excuse."

In passing to another subject, we may observe that this supposition of the Rector's proved to be correct.

When Edith left the breakfast-room she went into the garden, intending to gather a few sprigs of evergreen to preserve as reminiscences of a home to which (according to her own impression) she was about to bid adieu for ever. As her step sounded on the gravel walk between the shrubberies, little Willie Grey, who had just returned from the village blacksmith's, looked up

from the lock that he was carefully polishing on his torn sleeve, and quickened his pace to meet her.

“Hope yer better, Miss? I’s e so sorry to ’ear you was ill last night.”

Poor Edith! her colour came and went as she thought of yesterday’s errand, and all the after suffering of which the warm-hearted little fellow had been the unconscious instrument. She was too just to connect him with her causes of unhappiness; but would it do for her to say “good-bye” to him before she went away? Reason said “No,” so with a kind word she passed on, gathered her sprigs of evergreen, and then, going back to the house, walked calmly upstairs to prepare for her journey.

Yes, she was calm for the time. Her long pent-up misery had found a temporary relief in the burst of passionate weeping which had been drawn from her by the win-

ning kindness of the Rector and his wife. Sorrow might be humoured in the future ; but now she must reserve her strength for exertion.

At half-past two the Rector's large "four-wheel" was brought round to the front-door, the luggage having been put in at the stables to avoid observation ; and with a few whispered words of gratitude, Edith Moorfield left Oxenten for London.

Willie Grey (in all probability intentionally) had been sent to a farm at some little distance, and did not return till the evening. When he came to fetch his supper from the kitchen, he heard the servants talking over Miss Moorfield's departure, and speculating as to what could possibly be the reason of her leaving.

"'Twarn't a quarrel," said the cook, "for the mistress cried when she bid her 'good-bye;' and the master and her too were

quite grave over their dinner, and didn't talk and laugh half as much as they do gen'lly. I was 'most ready to cry myself, when she came and told me, and give me that pretty blue ribbon to trim my new straw bonnet."

"Yes, and she give me a book, and a shillin' to put by, cos she knew I wanted to save," chimed in the little schoolroom maid, with a glance at the footman which left no doubt of their prospective relationship. "Dear now, if I wasn't going to forget it; there's a shillin' for you, Willie, and a Testament, and Miss Moorfield said I was to tell you she hoped you'd learn to read it yourself some day."

"And didn't she say 'good-bye' to me?" sobbed the boy.

"Of course she did; she told us to say it for her. You was gone to Farmer Dufferin's."

“Poor little chap,” said the cook to herself; “he’s terr’bly cut up. I must try and find him something nice for his supper.” Then aloud, “’Tis queer she should ha’ left like that all of a sudden. I can’t make it out.”

Willie Grey knew, or imagined he knew, more of the causes of Edith’s disappearance than the rest; but, in the first place, he was too unhappy to talk; and, in the second, he had an instinctive dread of incurring Sir Frederick’s displeasure, should he even venture to allude to the mysterious slip of paper. So he crept back sorrowfully to his compartment in the stables, and soon cried himself to sleep.

The whole of that day Sir Frederick spent at the Castle in a state of the most miserable incertitude. One moment, resolved by a desperate effort to free himself from his present entanglement, and marry Edith

at all hazards, let society say what it chose ; the next, horror-struck at his own meditated treachery. He, a Morton, break his plighted word and disgrace himself for ever ? No ! ten thousand times no ! he had played the fool, and must bear the penalty of his folly. Nevertheless, on the third day of his arrival, he was unable to resist the temptation of wandering up and down in the vicinity of the Rectory grounds. He had no definite object ; indeed, he felt persuaded that Edith would avoid seeing him again ; but the restlessness and agitation of his mind drove him to do that which his judgment disapproved. It chanced that he met the Rector and his wife, who had just started on their accustomed afternoon's walk. Mr. Seagraves lifted his hat, and Mrs. Seagraves bowed distantly, but neither made any attempt to detain him, and he was much too pre-occupied to notice their extreme reserve.

A little farther on he saw Willie Grey carrying a parcel. The Baronet's heart beat faster. Should he ask for any news of Edith? Conscience whispered that to do so would be worse than foolish; but he could not help saying "Good day," as the boy was about to pass him without even a bow of recognition.

"Oh, sir; I never seed you." The little fellow touched his cap; but the accustomed smile was wanting; and on looking closer, Sir Frederick perceived he had been crying. Natural kind-heartedness, and perhaps a sort of reflected interest, prompted him to inquire the cause.

"What is the matter, my man?"

"Miss Moorfield's gone, and I know that bit o' paper druv her away. I know it did," said the boy, with a fresh burst of tears, not lessened by a certain spitefulness against his former favourite for his share in the transaction.

“Miss Moorfield gone, boy? Where?” asked the Baronet, who at the moment experienced that painful sensation which the French call “*un serrement de cœur*,” accompanied, however, by a strange feeling of relief that Providence had removed temptation from the thorny path that lay before him.

“Dunno, sir: Only wish I did.”

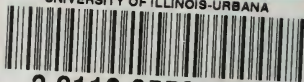
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